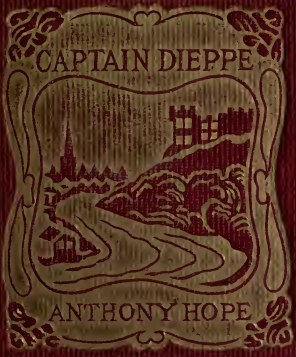

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Captain Dieppe

By

Anthony Hope

Author of "The Prisoner of Zenda,"
"Rupert of Hentzau," etc., etc.

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Captain Dieppe

Captain Dieppe

CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE ON THE BLUFF

To the eye of an onlooker Captain Dieppe's circumstances afforded high spirits no opportunity, and made ordinary cheerfulness a virtue which a stoic would not have disdained to own. Fresh from the failure of important plans; if not exactly a fugitive, still a man to whom recognition would be inconvenient and perhaps dangerous; with fifty francs in his pocket, and his spare wardrobe in a knapsack on his back; without immediate prospect of future employment or a replenishment of his purse; yet by no means in his first youth

or of an age when men love to begin the world utterly afresh; in few words, with none of those inner comforts of the mind which make external hardships no more than a pleasurable contrast, he marched up a long steep hill in the growing dusk of a stormy evening, his best hope to find, before he was soaked to the skin, some poor inn or poorer cottage where he might get food and beg shelter from the severity of the wind and rain that swept across the high ground and swooped down on the deep valleys, seeming to assail with a peculiar, conscious malice the human figure which faced them with unflinching front and the buoyant step of strength and confidence.

But the Captain was an alchemist, and the dross of outer events turned to gold in the marvellous crucible of his mind. Fortune should have known this and abandoned the vain attempt to torment him. He had failed, but no other man could have come so near success. He was alone, therefore free: poor, therefore

independent: desirous of hiding, therefore of importance: in a foreign land, therefore well placed for novel and pleasing accidents. The rain was a drop and the wind a puff: if he were wet, it would be delightful to get dry; since he was hungry, no inn could be too humble and no fare too rough. Fortune should indeed have set him on high, and turned her wasted malice on folk more penetrable by its stings.

The Captain whistled and sang. What a fright he had given the Ministers, how nearly he had brought back the Prince, what an uncommon and intimate satisfaction of soul came from carrying, under his wet coat, lists of names, letters, and what not—all capable of causing tremors in high quarters, and of revealing in spheres of activity hitherto unsuspected gentlemen—aye, and ladies—of the loftiest position; all of whom (the Captain was piling up his causes of self-congratulation) owed their present safety, and directed their present anxieties, to him,

Jean Dieppe, and to nobody else in the world. He broke off his whistling to observe aloud:

"Mark this, it is to very few that there comes a life so interesting as mine"; and his tune began again with an almost rollicking vigour.

What he said was perhaps true enough, if interest consists (as many hold) in uncertainty; in his case uncertainty both of life and of all that life gives, except that one best thing which he had pursued—activity. Of fame he had gained little, peace he had never tasted; of wealth he had never thought; of love—ah, of love now? His smile and the roguish shake of his head and pull at his long black moustache betrayed no dissatisfaction on that score. And as a fact (a thing which must at the very beginning be distinguished from an impression of the Captain's), people were in the habit of loving him: he never expected exactly this, although he had much self-confidence. Admiration was what he readily enough

conceived himself to inspire; love was a greater thing. On the whole, a fine life —why, yes, a very fine life indeed; and plenty of it left, for he was but thirty-nine.

"It really rains," he remarked at last, with an air of amiable surprise. "I am actually getting wet. I should be pleased to come to a village."

Fortune may be imagined as petulantly flinging this trifling favour at his head, in the hope, maybe, of making him realise the general undesirability of his lot. At any rate, on rounding the next corner of the ascending road, he saw a small village lying beneath him in the valley. Immediately below him, at the foot of what was almost a precipice, approached only by a rough zigzag path, lay a little river; the village was directly opposite across the stream, but the road, despairing of such a dip, swerved sharp off to his left, and, descending gradually, circled one end of the valley till it came to a bridge and thence made its way

round to the cluster of houses. There were no more than a dozen cottages, a tiny church, and an inn—certainly an inn, thought Dieppe, as he prepared to follow the road and pictured his supper already on the fire. But before he set out, he turned to his right; and there he stood looking at a scene of some beauty and of undeniable interest. A moment later he began to walk slowly up-hill in the opposite direction to that which the road pursued; he was minded to see a little more of the big house perched so boldly on that bluff above the stream, looking down so scornfully at the humble village on the other bank.

But habitations are made for men, and to Captain Dieppe beauties of position or architecture were subordinate to any indications he might discover or imagine of the characters of the folk who dwelt in a house and of their manner of living. Thus, not so much the position of the Castle (it could and did claim that title), or its handsome front, or the high wall

that enclosed it and its demesne on every side save where it faced the river, caught his attention as the apparently trifling fact that, whereas one half of the façade was brilliant with lights in every window, the other half was entirely dark and, to all seeming, uninhabited. "They are poor, they live in half the rooms only," he said to himself. But somehow this explanation sounded inadequate. He drew nearer, till he was close under the wall of the gardens. Then he noticed a small gate in the wall, sheltered by a little projecting porch. The Captain edged under the porch, took out a cigar, contrived to light it, and stood there puffing pensively. He was protected from the rain, which now fell very heavily, and he was asking himself again why only half the house was lighted up. This was the kind of trivial, yet whimsical, puzzle on which he enjoyed trying his wits.

He had stood where he was for a few minutes when he heard steps on the other side of the wall; a moment later a key

turned in the lock and the gate opened. Dieppe turned to find himself confronted by a young man of tall stature; the dim light showed only the vague outline of a rather long and melancholy, but certainly handsome, face; the stranger's air was eminently distinguished. Dieppe raised his hat and bowed.

"You 'll excuse the liberty," he said, smiling. "I 'm on my way to the village yonder to find quarters for the night. Your porch offered me a short rest and shelter from the rain while I smoked a cigar. I presume that I have the honour of addressing the owner of this fine house?"

"You 're right, sir. I am the Count of Fieramondi," said the young man, "and this is my house. Do me the favour to enter it and refresh yourself."

"Oh, but you entertain company, and look at me!" With a smile Dieppe indicated his humble and travel-worn appearance.

"Company? None, I assure you."

"But the lights?" suggested the Captain, with a wave of his hand.

"You will find me quite alone," the Count assured him, as he turned into the garden and motioned his guest to follow.

Crossing a path and a stretch of grass, they entered a room opening immediately on the garden; it was large and high.

Situated at the corner of the house, it had two windows facing on the garden and two towards the river. It was richly and soberly furnished, and hung with family portraits. A blazing fire revealed these features to Dieppe, and at the same time imparted a welcome glow to his body. The next minute a man-servant entered with a pair of candlesticks, which he set on the table.

"I am about to dine," said the Count. "Will you honour me with your company?"

"Your kindness to a complete stranger—" Dieppe began.

"The kindness will be yours. Company is a favour to one who lives alone."

And the Count proceeded to give the necessary orders to his servant. Then, turning again to Dieppe, he said, "In return, pray let me know the name of the gentleman who honours my house."

"I can refuse nothing to my host—to anybody else my name is the only thing I should refuse. I am called Captain Dieppe."

"Of the French service? Though you speak Italian excellently."

"Ah, that accent of mine! No, not of the French service—in fact, not of any service. I have been in many services, but I can show you no commission as captain."

For the first time the Count smiled.

"It is, perhaps, a sobriquet?" he asked, but with no offensive air or insinuation.

"The spontaneous tribute of my comrades all over the world," answered Dieppe, proudly—"is it for me to refuse it?"

"By no means," agreed his host, smiling still; "I don't doubt that you have amply earned it."

Dieppe's bow confirmed the supposition while it acknowledged the compliment.

Civilities such as these, when aided by dinner and a few glasses of red wine, soon passed into confidences—on the Captain's side at least. Accustomed to keep other people's secrets, he burdened himself with few of his own.

"I have always had something of a passion for politics," he confessed, after giving his host an account of some stirring events in South America in which he had borne a part.

"You surprise me," was the Count's comment.

"Perhaps I should say," Dieppe explained, "for handling those forces which lie behind politics. That has been my profession." The Count looked up.

"Oh, I 'm no sentimentalist," Dieppe went on. "I ask for my pay—I receive it—and sometimes I contrive to keep it."

"You interest me," said his host, in whose manner Dieppe recognised an attractive simplicity.

"But in my last enterprise—well, there are accidents in every trade." His shrug was very good-natured.

"The enterprise failed?" asked the Count, sympathetically.

"Certainly, or I should not be enjoying your hospitality. Moreover I failed too; for I had to skip out of the country in such haste that I left behind me fifty thousand francs, and the police have laid hands on it. It was my—what shall I call it? My little *pourboire*." He sighed lightly, and then smiled again. "So I am a homeless wanderer, content if I can escape the traps of police agents."

"You anticipate being annoyed in that way?"

"They are on my track, depend upon it." He touched the outside of his breast pocket. "I carry—but no matter. The pursuit only adds a spice to my walks, and so long as I don't need to sell my revolver for bread—". He checked himself abruptly, a frown of shame or vexation on his face. "I beg your pardon," he

went on, "I beg your pardon. But you won't take me for a beggar?"

"I regret what you have said only because you said it before I had begged a favour of you—a favour I had resolved to venture on asking. But come, though I don't think you a beggar, you shall be sure that I am one." He rose and laid his hand on Dieppe's shoulder. "Stay with me for to-night at least—and for as much longer as you will. Nobody will trouble you. I live in solitude, and your society will lighten it. Let me ring and give orders for your entertainment?"

Dieppe looked up at him; the next moment he caught his hand, crying, "With all my heart, dear host! Your only difficulty shall be to get rid of me."

The Count rang, and directed his servant to prepare the Cardinal's Room. Dieppe noticed that the order was received with a glance of surprise, but the master of the house repeated it, and, as the servant withdrew, added, "It is called after an old member of our family, but I

can answer for its comfort myself, for I have occupied it until—"

"I 'm turning you out?" exclaimed Dieppe.

"I left it yesterday." The Count frowned as he sipped his wine. "I left it owing to—er—circumstances," he murmured, with some appearance of embarrassment in his manner.

"His Eminence is restless?" asked the Captain, laughing.

"I beg pardon?"

"I mean—a ghost?"

"No, a cat," was the Count's quiet but somewhat surprising answer.

"I don't mind cats; I am very fond of them," Dieppe declared with the readiness of good breeding, but he glanced at his host with a curiosity that would not be stifled. The Count lived in solitude. Half his house—and that the other half—was brilliantly lighted, and he left his bedroom because of a cat. Here were circumstances that might set the least inquisitive of men thinking. It crossed

Dieppe's mind that his host was (he used a mild word) eccentric, but the Count's manner gave little warrant for the supposition; and Dieppe could not believe that so courteous a gentleman would amuse himself by making fun of a guest. He listened eagerly when the Count, after a long silence, went on to say:

"The reason I put forward must, no doubt, sound ludicrous, but the fact is that the animal, in itself a harmless beast, became the occasion, or was made the means, of forcing on me encounters with a person whom I particularly wish to avoid. You, however, will not be annoyed in that way."

There he stopped, and turned the conversation to general topics. Never had Dieppe's politeness been subjected to such a strain.

No relief was granted to him. The Count talked freely and well on a variety of questions till eleven o'clock, and then proposed to show his guest to his bedroom. Dieppe accepted the offer in de-

spair, but he would have sat up all night had there seemed any chance of the Count's becoming more explicit.

The Cardinal's Room was a large apartment situated on the upper floor (there were but two), about the middle of the house; its windows looked across the river, which rippled pleasantly in the quiet of the night when Dieppe flung up the sash and put his head out. He turned first to the left. Save his own room, all was dark: the Count, no doubt, slept at the back. Then, craning his neck, he tried to survey the right wing. The illumination was quenched; light showed in one window only, a window on the same level with his and distant from it perhaps forty feet. With a deep sigh the Captain drew his head back and shut out the chilly air.

Ah, there was an inner door on the right hand side of the room; that the Captain had not noticed before. Walking up to it, he perceived that it was bolted at top and bottom; but the key

was in the lock. He stood and looked at this door; it seemed that it must lead, either directly or by way of another apartment between, to the room whose lights he had just seen. He pulled his moustache thoughtfully; and he remembered that there was a person whom the Count particularly wished to avoid and, owing (in some way) to a cat, could not rely on being able to avoid if he slept in the Cardinal's Room.

"Well, then—" began Dieppe with a thoughtful frown. "Oh, I can't stand it much longer!" he ended, with a smile and a shrug.

And then there came—the Captain was really not surprised, he had been almost expecting it—a mew, a peevish, plaintive mew. "I won't open that door," said the Captain. The complaint was repeated. "Poor beast!" murmured the Captain. "Shut up in that—in that—deuce take it, in that what?" His hand shot up to the top bolt and pressed it softly back. "No, no," said he. Another mew de-

feated his struggling conscience. Pushing back the lower bolt in its turn, he softly unlocked the door and opened it cautiously. There in the passage—for a narrow passage some twelve or fifteen feet long was revealed—near his door, visible in the light from his room, was a large, sleek, yellow cat from whose mouth was proceeding energetic lamentation. But on sight of Dieppe the creature ceased its cries, and in apparent alarm ran half-way along the passage and sat down beside a small hole in the wall. From this position it regarded the intruder with solemn, apprehensive eyes. Dieppe, holding his door wide open, returned the animal's stare. This must be the cat which had ejected the Count. But why — ?

In a moment the half-formed question found its answer, though the answer seemed rather to ask a new riddle than to answer the old one. A door at the other end of the passage opened a little way, and a melodious voice called softly,

"Papa, papa!" The cat ran towards the speaker, the door was opened wide, and for an instant Dieppe had the vision of a beautiful young woman, clad in a white dressing-gown and with hair about her shoulders. As he saw her she saw him, and gave a startled shriek. The cat, apparently bewildered, raced back to the aperture in the wall and disappeared with an agitated whisk of its tail. The lady's door and the Captain's closed with a double simultaneous reverberating bang, and the Captain drove his bolts home with guilty haste.

His first act was to smoke a cigarette. That done, he began to undress slowly and almost unconsciously. During the process he repeated to himself more than once the Count's measured but emphatic words: "A person whom I particularly wish to avoid." The words died away as Dieppe climbed into the big four-poster with a wrinkle of annoyance on his brow.

For the lady at the other end of the passage did not, to the Captain's mind,

look the sort of person whom a handsome and lonely young man would particularly wish to avoid. In spite of the shortness of his vision, in spite of her obvious alarm and confusion, she had, in fact, seemed to him very much indeed the opposite.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN BY THE STREAM

Apart from personal hopes or designs, the presence, or even the proximity, of a beautiful woman is a cheerful thing: it gives a man the sense of happiness, like sunshine or sparkling water; these are not his either, but he can look at and enjoy them; he smiles back at the world in thanks for its bountiful favours. Never had life seemed better to Dieppe than when he awoke the next morning; yet there was guilt on his conscience—he ought not to have opened that door. But the guilt became parent to a new pleasure and gave him the one thing needful to perfection of existence—a pretty little secret of his own, and this time one that he was minded to keep.

"To think," he exclaimed, pointing a scornful finger at the village across the river, "that but for my luck I might be at the inn! Heaven above us, I might even have been leaving this enchanting spot!" He looked down at the stream. A man was fishing there, a tall, well-made fellow in knickerbockers and a soft felt hat of the sort sometimes called Tyrolean. "Good luck to you, my boy!" nodded the happy and therefore charitable Captain.

Going down to the Count's pleasant room at the corner of the left wing, he found his host taking his coffee. Compliments passed, and soon Dieppe was promising to spend a week at least with his new friend.

"I am a student," observed the Count, "and you must amuse yourself. There are fine walks, a little rough shooting perhaps—"

"Fishing?" asked Dieppe, thinking of the man in the soft hat.

"The fishing is worth nothing at all," answered the Count, decisively. He

paused for a moment and then went on: "There is, however, one request that I am obliged to make to you."

"Any wish of yours is a command to me, my dear host."

"It is that during your visit you will hold no communication whatever with the right wing of the house." The Count was now lighting a cigar; he completed the operation carefully, and then added: "The Countess's establishment and mine are entirely separate—entirely."

"The Countess!" exclaimed Dieppe, not unnaturally surprised.

"I regret to trouble you with family matters. My wife and I are not in agreement; we have n't met for three months. She lives in the right wing with two servants; I live in the left with three. We hold no communication, and our servants are forbidden to hold any among themselves; obedience is easier to insure as we have kept only those we can trust, and, since entertaining is out of the question, have dismissed the rest."

"You have—er—had a difference?" the Captain ventured to suggest, for the Count seemed rather embarrassed.

"A final and insuperable difference, a final and permanent separation." The Count's tone was sad but very firm.

"I am truly grieved. But—forgive me—does n't the arrangement you indicate entail some inconvenience?"

"Endless inconvenience," assented the Count.

"To live under the same roof, and yet—"

"My dear sir, during the negotiations which followed on the Countess's refusal to—to well, to meet my wishes, I represented that to her with all the emphasis at my command. I am bound to add that she represented it no less urgently to me."

"On the other hand, of course, the scandal—" Dieppe began.

"We Fieramondi do not much mind scandal. That was n't the difficulty. The fact is that I thought it the

Countess's plain duty to relieve me of her presence. She took what I may call the exactly converse view. You follow me?"

"Perfectly," said Dieppe, repressing an inclination to smile.

"And declared that nothing—nothing on earth—should induce her to quit the Castle even for a day; she would regard such an act as a surrender. I said I should regard my own departure in the same light. So we stay here under the extremely inconvenient arrangement I have referred to. To make sure of my noticing her presence, my wife indulges in something approaching to an illumination every night."

The Count rose and began to walk up and down as he went on with a marked access of warmth. "But even the understanding we arrived at," he pursued, "I regret to say that my wife did n't see fit to adhere to in good faith. She treated it with what I must call levity." He faced round on his guest suddenly. "I mentioned a cat to you," he said.

"You did," Dieppe admitted, eyeing him rather apprehensively.

"I don't know," pursued the Count, "whether you noticed a door in your room?" Dieppe nodded. "It was bolted?" Dieppe nodded again. "If you had opened that door—pardon the supposition—you would have seen a passage. At the other end is another door, leading to the Countess's apartments. See, I will show you. This fork is the door from your room; this knife is—"

"I follow your description perfectly," interposed Dieppe, assailed now with a keener sense of guilt.

"The Countess possesses a cat—a thing to which in itself I have no objection. To give this creature, which she likes to have with her constantly, the opportunity of exercise, she has caused an opening to be made from the passage on to the roof. This piece of bread will represent—"

"I understand, I assure you," murmured Dieppe.

"Every evening she lets the cat into the passage, whence it escapes on to the roof. On its return it would naturally betake itself to her room again."

"Naturally," assented the Captain. Are not cats most reasonable animals?

"But," said the Count, beginning to walk about again, "she shuts her door: the animal mews at it; my wife ignores the appeal. What then? The cat, in despair, turns to my door. I take no heed. It mews persistently. At last, wearied of the noise, I open my door. Always—by design, as I believe—at that very moment my wife flings her door open. You see the position?"

"I can imagine it," said Dieppe, discreetly.

"We are face to face! Nothing between us except the passage—and the cat! And then the Countess, with what I am compelled to term a singular offensiveness, not to say insolence, of manner, slams the door in my face, leaving me to deal with the cat as I best can! My

friend, it became intolerable. I sent a message begging the Countess to do me the favour of changing her apartment.

"She declined point-blank. I determined then to change mine, and sent word of my intention to the Countess." He flung himself into a chair. "Her reply was to send back to me her marriage contract and her wedding-ring, and to beg to be informed whether my present stay at the Castle was likely to be prolonged."

"And you replied— ?"

"I made no reply," answered the Count, crossing his legs.

A combination of feelings prevented Dieppe from disclosing the incident of the previous night. He loved a touch of mystery and a possibility of romance. Again, it is not the right thing for a guest to open bolted doors. A man does not readily confess to such a breach of etiquette, and his inclination to make a clean breast of it is not increased when it turns out that the door in question leads to the apartments of his host's wife.

Finally, the moment for candour had slipped by: you cannot allow a man to explain a locality by means of forks and knives and pieces of bread and then inform him that you were all the while acquainted with its features. Dieppe was silent, and the Count, who was obviously upset by the recital of his grievances, presently withdrew to his study, a room on the upper floor which looked out on the gardens at the back of the house.

"What did they quarrel about?" Dieppe asked himself; the Count had thrown no light on that. "I 'll be hanged if I 'd quarrel with her," smiled the Captain, remembering the face he had seen at the other end of the passage. "But," he declared to himself, virtuously, "the cat may mew till it 's hoarse—I won't open that door again." With this resolve strong in his heart, he took his hat and strolled out into the garden.

He had no sooner reached the front of the house than he gave an exclamation of surprise. The expanse of rather rough

grass sprinkled with flower-beds, which stretched from the Castle to the point where the ground dipped steeply towards the river, was divided across by a remarkable structure—a tall, new, bare wooden fence, constituting a very substantial barrier. It stood a few paces to the right of the window which the Captain identified as his own, and ran some yards down the hill. Here was plain and strong evidence of the state of war which existed between the two wings. Neither the Count nor the Countess would risk so much as a sight of the other while they took their respective promenades. The Captain approached the obstacle and examined it with a humorous interest; then he glanced up at the wall above, drawing a couple of feet back to get a better view. "Ah," said he, "just half-way between my window and—hers! They are very punctilious, these combatants!"

Natural curiosity must, so far as it can, excuse Captain Dieppe for spending the rest of the morning in what he termed a

reconnaissance of the premises, or that part of them which was open to his inspection. He found little. There was no sign of anybody entering or leaving the other wing, although (as he discovered on strolling round by the road) a gate in the wall on the right of the gardens, and a carriage-drive running up to it, gave independent egress from that side of the Castle. Breakfast with the Count was no more fruitful of information; the Count discussed (apropos of a book at which he had been glancing) the question of the Temporal Power of the Papacy with learning and some heat: he was, it appeared, strongly opposed to these ecclesiastical claims, and spoke of them with marked bitterness. Dieppe, very little interested, escaped for a walk early in the afternoon. It was five o'clock when he regained the garden and stood for a few moments looking down towards the river. It was just growing dusk, and the lights of the inn were visible in the village across the valley.

Fishermen are a persevering race; the young man in the soft hat was still at his post. But no, he was not fishing! He was walking up and down in a moody, purposeless way, and it seemed to the Captain that he turned his head very often towards the Castle. The Captain sat down on a garden-seat close under the barricade and watched; an idea was stirring in his brain—an idea that made him pat his breast-pocket, twirl his moustache, and smile contentedly. "Not much of a fisherman, I think," he murmured. "Ah, my friend, I know the cut of your jib, I fancy. After poor old Jean Dieppe, are n't you, my boy? A police-spy; I could tell him among a thousand!"

Equally pleased with the discovery and with his own acuteness in making it, the Captain laughed aloud; then in an instant he sat bolt upright, stiff and still, listening intently. For through the barricade had come two sounds—a sweet, low, startled voice, that cried half in a whisper, "Heavens, he 's there!" and

then the rustle of skirts in hasty flight. Without an instant's thought—without remembering his promise to the Count—Dieppe sprang up, ran down the hill, turned the corner of the barricade, and found himself in the Countess's territory.

He was too late. The lady had made good her escape. There was nobody to be seen except the large yellow cat: it sat on the path and blinked gravely at the chagrined Captain.

"Animal, you annoy me!" he said with a stamp of his foot. The cat rose, turned, and walked away with its tail in the air. "I 'm making a fool of myself," muttered Dieppe. "Or," he amended with a dawning smile, "she 's making a fool of me." His smile broadened a little. "Why not?" he asked. Then he drew himself up and slowly returned to his own side of the barricade, shaking his head and murmuring, "No, no, Jean, my boy, no, no! He 's your host—your host, Jean," as he again seated himself on the bench under the barricade.

Evening was now falling fast; the fisherman was no longer to be seen; perfect peace reigned over the landscape. Dieppe yawned; perfect peace was with him a synonym for intolerable dulness.

"Permit me, my dear friend," said a voice behind him, "to read you a little poem which I have beguiled my leisure by composing."

He turned to find the Count behind him, holding a sheet of paper.

Probably the poet had his composition by heart, for the light seemed now too dim to read by. However this may be, a rich and tender voice recited to Dieppe's sympathetic ears as pretty a little appeal (so the Captain thought) as had ever been addressed by lover to an obdurate or capricious lady. The Captain's eyes filled with tears as he listened—tears for the charm of the verse, for the sad beauty of the sentiment, also, alas, for the unhappy gentleman from whose heart came verse and sentiment.

"My friend, you love!" cried the Cap-

tain, holding out his hand as the Count ended his poem and folded up the paper.

"And you are unhappy," he added.

The Count smiled in a sad but friendly fashion.

"Is n't it the same thing?" he asked. "And at any rate as to me you are right."

Dieppe wrung his hand. The Count, apparently much moved, turned and walked slowly away, leaving Dieppe to his meditations.

"He loves her." That was the form they took. Whatever the meaning of the quarrel, the Count loved his wife; it was to her the poem was written, hers was the heart which it sought to soften. Yet she had not looked hard-hearted. No, she had looked adorable, frankly adorable; a lady for whose sake any man, even so wise and experienced a man as Captain Dieppe, might well commit many a folly, and have many a heartache; a lady for whom—

"Rascal that I am!" cried the Captain, interrupting himself and springing

up. He raised his hand in the air and declared aloud with emphasis: "On my honour, I will think no more of her. I will think, I say, no more of her."

On the last word came a low laugh from the other side of the barricade. The Captain started, looked round, listened, smiled, frowned, pulled his moustache. Then, with extraordinary suddenness, resolution, and fierceness, he turned and walked quickly away. "Honour, honour!" he was saying to himself; and the path of honour seemed to lie in flight. Unhappily, though, the Captain was more accustomed to advance.

CHAPTER III

THE LADY IN THE GARDEN

It is possible that Captain Dieppe, full of contentment with the quarters to which fortune had guided him, underrated the merits and attractions of the inn in the village across the river. Fare and accommodation indeed were plain and rough at the Aquila Nera, but the company round its fireside would have raised his interest. On one side of the hearth sat the young fisherman, he in whom Dieppe had discovered a police-spy on the track of the secrets in that breast-pocket of the Captain's. Oh, these discoveries of the Captain's! For M. Paul de Roustache was not a police-spy, and, moreover, had never seen the gallant Captain in his life, and took no interest in him—a state of things most unlikely

to occur to the Captain's mind. Had Paul, then, fished for fishing's sake? It by no means followed, if only the Captain could have remembered that there were other people in the world besides himself —and one or two others even in the Count of Fieramondi's house. "I 'll get at her if I can; but if she 's obstinate, I 'll go to the Count—in the last resort I 'll go to the Count, for I mean to have the money." Reflections such as these (and they were M. de Roustache's at this moment) would have shown even Captain Dieppe—not, perhaps, that he had done the fisherman an injustice, for the police may be very respectable—but at least that he had mistaken his errand and his character.

But however much it might be abashed momentarily, the Captain's acumen would not have been without a refuge. Who was the elderly man with stooping shoulders and small keen eyes, who sat on the other side of the fire, and had been engaged in persuading Paul that

he too was a fisherman, that he too loved beautiful scenery, that he too travelled for pleasure, and, finally, that his true, rightful, and only name was Monsieur Guillaume? To which Paul had responded in kind, save that he had not volunteered his name. And now each was wondering what the other wanted, and each was wishing very much that the other would seek his bed, so that the inn might be sunk in quiet and a gentleman be at liberty to go about his private business unobserved.

The landlord came in, bringing a couple of candles, and remarking that it was hard on ten o'clock; but let not the gentlemen hurry themselves. The guests sat a little while longer, exchanged a remark or two on the prospects of the weather, and then, each despairing of outstaying the other, went their respective ways to bed.

Almost at the same moment, up at the Castle, Dieppe was saying to his host, "Good night, my friend, good night.

I 'm not for bed yet. The night is fine, and I 'll take a stroll in the garden." A keen observer might have noticed that the Captain did not meet his friend's eye as he spoke. There was a touch of guilt in his air, which the Count's abstraction did not allow him to notice. Conscience was having a hard battle of it; would the Captain keep on the proper side of the barricade?

Monsieur Guillaume, owing to his profession or his temperament, was a man who, if the paradox may be allowed, was not surprised at surprises. Accordingly when he himself emerged from the bedroom to which he had retired, took the path across the meadow from the inn towards the river, and directed his course to the stepping-stones which he had marked as he strolled about before dinner, he was merely interested and in no way astonished to perceive his companion of the fireside in front of him; the moon, nearly full, revealed Paul's Tyrolean headpiece mounting the hill on the far

side of the stream. Guillaume followed it, crossed the river at the cost of wet boots, ascended the slope, and crouched down behind a bush a few yards from the top. He had gained on Paul, and arrived at his hiding-place in time to hear the exclamation wrung from his precursor by the sudden sight of the barricade: from the valley below the erection had been so hidden by bushes as to escape notice.

"What the devil's that for?" exclaimed Paul de Roustache in a low voice. He was not left without an answer. The watcher had cause for the smile that spread over his face, as, peeping out, he saw a man's figure rise from a seat and come forward. The next moment Paul was addressed in smooth and suave tones, and in his native language, which he had hurriedly employed in his surprised ejaculation.

"That, sir," said Dieppe, waving his hand towards the barricade, "is erected in order to prevent intrusion. But it does n't seem to be very successful."

"Who are you?" demanded Paul, angrily.

"I should, I think, be the one to ask that question," Dieppe answered with a smile. "It is not, I believe, your garden?" His emphasis on "your" came very near to an assertion of proprietorship in himself. "Pray, sir, to what am I indebted for the honour of this meeting?" The Captain was enjoying this unexpected encounter with his supposed pursuer. Apparently the pursuer did not know him. Very well; he would take advantage of that bit of stupidity on the part of the pursuer's superior officers. It was like them to send a man who did n't know him! "You wish to see some one in the house?" he asked, looking at Paul's angry and puzzled face.

But Paul began to recover his coolness.

"I am indeed to blame for my intrusion," he said. "I 'm passing the night at the inn, and tempted by the mildness of the air—"

"It is certainly very mild," agreed Dieppe.

"I strolled across the stepping-stones and up the hill. I admire the appearance of a river by night."

"Certainly, certainly. But, sir, the river does not run in this garden."

"Of course not, M. le Comte," said Paul, forcing a smile. "At least I presume that I address—?"

Dieppe took off his hat, bowed, and replaced it. He had, however, much ado not to chuckle.

"But I was led on by the sight of this remarkable structure." He indicated the barricade again.

"There was nothing else you wished to see?"

"On my honour, nothing. And I must offer you my apologies."

"As for the structure—" added Dieppe, shrugging his shoulders.

"Yes?" cried Paul, with renewed interest.

"Its purpose is to divide the garden

into two portions. No more and no less, I assure you."

Paul's face took on an ugly expression.

"I am at such a disadvantage," he observed, "that I cannot complain of M. le Comte's making me the subject of pleasantry. Under other circumstances I might raise different emotions in him. Perhaps I shall have my opportunity."

"When you find me, sir, prowling about other people's gardens by night—"

"Prowling!" interrupted Paul, fiercely.

"Well, then," said Dieppe, with an air of courteous apology, "shall we say skulking?"

"You shall pay for that!"

"With pleasure, if you convince me that it is a gentleman who asks satisfaction."

Paul de Roustache smiled. "At my convenience," he said, "I will give you a reference which shall satisfy you most abundantly." He drew back, lifted his hat, and bowed.

"I shall await it with interest," said

Dieppe, returning the salutation, and then folding his arms and watching Paul's retreat down the hill. "The fellow brazened it out well," he reflected; "but I shall hear no more of him, I fancy. After all, police-agents don't fight duels with—why, with Counts, you know!" And his laugh rang out in hearty enjoyment through the night air. "Ha, ha—it 's not so easy to put salt on old Dieppe's tail!" With a sigh of satisfaction he turned round, as though to go back to the house. But his eye was caught by a light in the window next to his own; and the window was open. The Captain stood and looked up, and Monsieur Guillaume, who had overheard his little soliloquy and discovered from it a fact of great interest to himself, seized the opportunity of rising from behind his bush and stealing off down the hill after Paul de Roustache.

"Ah," thought the Captain, as he gazed at the window, "if there were no such thing as honour or loyalty, as friendship—"

"Sir," said a timid voice at his elbow.

Dieppe shot round, and then and there lost his heart. One sight of her a man might endure and be heart-whole, not two. There, looking up at him with the most bewitching mouth, the most destructive eyes, was the lady whom he had seen at the end of the passage. Certainly she was the most irresistible creature he had ever met; so he declared to himself, not, indeed, for the first time in his life, but none the less with unimpeachable sincerity. For a man could do nothing but look at her, and the man who looked at her had to smile at her; then if she smiled, the man had to laugh; and what happened afterwards would depend on the inclinations of the lady: at least it would not be very safe to rely on the principles of the gentleman.

But now she was not laughing. Genuine and deep distress was visible on her face.

"Madame la Comtesse—" stammered the dazzled Captain.

For an instant she looked at him, seeming, he thought, to ask if she could trust him. Then she said impatiently: "Yes, yes; but never mind that. Who are you? Oh, why did you tell him you were the Count? Oh, you 've ruined everything!"

"Ruined—?"

"Yes, yes; because now he 'll write to the Count. Oh, I heard your quarrel. I listened from the window. Oh, I did n't think anybody could be as stupid as you!"

"Madame!" pleaded the unhappy Captain. "I thought the fellow was a police-agent on my track, and—"

"On your track? Oh, who are you?"

"My name is Dieppe, madame—Captain Dieppe, at your service." It was small wonder that a little stiffness had crept into the Captain's tones. This was not, so far, just the sort of interview which had filled his dreams. For the first time the glimmer of a smile appeared on the lady's lips, the ghost of a sparkle in her eyes.

"What a funny name!" she observed reflectively.

"I fail to see the drollery of it."

"Oh, don't be silly and starchy. You 've got us into terrible trouble."

"You?"

"Yes; all of us. Because now—" She broke off abruptly. "How do you come to be here?" she asked in a rather imperious tone.

Dieppe gave a brief account of himself, concluding with the hope that his presence did not annoy the Countess. The lady shook her head and glanced at him with a curious air of inquiry or examination. In spite of the severity, or even rudeness, of her reproaches, Dieppe fell more and more in love with her every moment. At last he could not resist a sly reference to their previous encounter. She raised innocent eyes to his.

"I saw the door was open, but I did n't notice anybody there," she said with irreproachable demureness.

The Captain looked at her for a moment, then he began to laugh.

"I myself saw nothing but a cat," said he.

The lady began to laugh.

"You must let me atone for my stupidity," cried Dieppe, catching her hand.

"I wonder if you could!"

"I will, or die in the attempt. Tell me how!" And the Captain kissed the hand that he had captured.

"There are conditions."

"Not too hard?"

"First, you must n't breathe a word to the Count of having seen me or—or anybody else."

"I should n't have done that, anyhow," remarked Dieppe, with a sudden twinge of conscience.

"Secondly, you must never try to see me, except when I give you leave."

"I won't try, I will only long," said the Captain.

"Thirdly, you must ask no questions."

"It is too soon to ask the only one

which I would n't pledge myself at your bidding never to ask."

"To whom," inquired the lady, "do you conceive yourself to be speaking, Captain Dieppe?" But the look that accompanied the rebuke was not very severe.

"Tell me what I must do," implored the Captain.

She looked at him very kindly, partly because he was a handsome fellow, partly because it was her way; and she said with the prettiest, simplest air, as though she were making the most ordinary request and never thought of a refusal:

"Will you give me fifty thousand francs?"

"I would give you a million thousand —but I have only fifty."

"It would be your all, then! Oh, I should n't like to—"

"You misunderstand me, madame. I have fifty francs, not fifty thousand."

"Oh!" said she, frowning. Then she laughed a little; then, to Dieppe's indescribable agony, her eyes filled with tears

and her lips quivered. She put her hand up to her eyes; Dieppe heard a sob.

"For God's sake—" he whispered.

"Oh, I can't help it," she said, and she sobbed again; but now she did not try to hide her face. She looked up in the Captain's, conquering her sobs, but unable to restrain her tears. "It 's not my fault, and it is so hard on me," she wailed. Then she suddenly jumped back, crying, "Oh, what were you going to do?" and regarding the Captain with reproachful alarm.

"I don't know," said Dieppe in some confusion, as he straightened himself again. "I could n't help it; you aroused my sympathy," he explained—for what the explanation might be worth.

"You won't be able to help me," she murmured, "unless—unless—"

"What?"

"Well, unless you 're able to help it, you know."

"I will think," promised Dieppe, "of my friend the Count."

"Of the—? Oh yes, of course." There never was such a face for changes—she was smiling now. "Yes, think of your friend the Count; that will be capital. Oh, but we 're wasting time!"

"On the contrary, madame," the Captain assured her with overwhelming sincerity.

"Yes, we are. And we 're not safe here. Suppose the Count saw us!"

"Why, yes, that would be—"

"That would be fatal," said she decisively, and the Captain did not feel himself in a position to contradict her. He contented himself with taking her hand again and pressing it softly. Certainly she made a man feel very sympathetic.

"But I must see you again—"

"Indeed I trust so, madame."

"On business."

"Call it what you will, so that—"

"Not here. Do you know the village? No? Well, listen. If you go through the village, past the inn and up the hill, you will come to a Cross by the roadside.

Strike off from that across the grass, again uphill. When you reach the top you will find a hollow, and in it a shepherd's hut—deserted. Meet me there at dusk to-morrow, about six, and I will tell you how to help me."

"I will be there," said the Captain.

The lady held out both her hands—small, white, ungloved, and unringed. The Captain's eyes rested a moment on the finger that should have worn the golden band which united her to his friend the Count. It was not there; she had sent it back—with the marriage contract. With a sigh, strangely blended of pain and pleasure, he bent and kissed her hands. She drew them away quickly, gave a nervous little laugh, and ran off. The Captain watched her till she disappeared round the corner of the barricade, and then with another deep sigh betook himself to his own quarters.

The cat did not mew in the passage that night. None the less Captain Dieppe's slumbers were broken and disturbed.

CHAPTER IV

THE INN IN THE VILLAGE

While confessing that her want of insight into Paul de Roustache's true character was inconceivably stupid, the Countess of Fieramondi maintained that her other mistakes (that was the word she chose—indiscretions she rejected as too severe) were extremely venial, and indeed, under all the circumstances, quite natural. It was true that she had promised to hold no communication with Paul after that affair of the Baroness von Englebaden's diamond necklace, in which his part was certainly peculiar, though hardly so damnatory as Andrea chose to assume. It was true that, when one is supposed to be at Mentone for one's health one should not leave one's courier

there (in order to receive letters) and reside instead with one's maid at Monte Carlo; true, further, that it is unwise to gamble heavily, to lose largely, to confide the misfortune to a man of Paul's equivocal position and reputation, to borrow twenty thousand francs of him, to lose or spend all, save what served to return home with, and finally to acknowledge the transaction and the obligation both very cordially by word of mouth and (much worse) in letters which were—well, rather effusively grateful. There was nothing absolutely criminal in all this, unless the broken promise must be stigmatised as such; and of that Andrea had heard: he was aware that she had renewed acquaintance with M. de Roustache. The rest of the circumstances were so fatal in that they made it impossible for her to atone for this first lapse. In fine, Count Andrea, not content now to rely on her dishonoured honour, but willing to trust to her strong religious feelings, had demanded of her an oath

that she would hold no further communication of any sort, kind, or nature with Paul de Roustache. The oath was a terrible oath—to be sworn on a relic which had belonged to the Cardinal and was most sacred in the eyes of the Fieramondi. And with Paul in possession of those letters and not in possession of his twenty thousand francs, the Countess felt herself hardly a free agent. For if she did not communicate with Paul, to a certainty Paul would communicate with Andrea. If that happened she would die; while if she broke the oath she would never dare to die. In this dilemma the Countess could do nothing but declare—first, that she had met Paul accidentally (which so far as the first meeting went was true enough), secondly, that she would not live with a man who did not trust her; and, thirdly, that to ask an oath of her was a cruel and wicked mockery from a man whose views on the question of the Temporal Power proclaimed him to be little, if at all, better than an infidel.

The Count was very icy and very polite. The Countess withdrew to the right wing; receiving the Count's assurance that the erection of the barricade would not be disagreeable to him, she had it built—and sat down behind it (so to speak) awaiting in sorrow, dread, and loneliness the terrible moment of Paul de Roustache's summons. And (to make one more confession on her behalf) her secret and real reason for ordering that nightly illumination, which annoyed the Count so sorely, lay in the hope of making the same gentleman think, when he did arrive, that she entertained a houseful of guests, and was therefore well protected by her friends. Otherwise he would try to force an interview under cover of night.

These briefly indicated facts of the case, so appalling to the unhappy Countess, were on the other hand eminently satisfactory to M. Paul de Roustache. To be plain, they meant money, either from the Countess or from the Count. To Paul's

mind they seemed to mean—well, say, fifty thousand francs—that twenty of his returned, and thirty as a solatium for the trifling with his affections of which he proposed to maintain that the Countess had been guilty. The Baroness von Englebaden's diamonds had gone the way and served the purposes to which family diamonds seem at some time or other to be predestined: and Paul was very hard up. The Countess must be very frightened, the Count was very proud. The situation was certainly worth fifty thousand francs to Paul de Roustache. Sitting outside the inn, smoking his cigar, on the morning after his encounter in the garden, he thought over all this; and he was glad that he had not let his anger at the Count's insolence run away with his discretion; the insolence would make his revenge all the sweeter when he put his hand, either directly or indirectly, into the Count's pocket and exacted compensation to the tune of fifty thousand francs.

Buried in these thoughts—in the course of which it is interesting to observe that he did not realise his own iniquity—he failed to notice that Monsieur Guillaume had sat down beside him and, like himself, was gazing across the valley towards the Castle. He started to find the old fellow at his elbow; he started still more when he was addressed by his name. "You know my name?" he exclaimed, with more perturbation than a stranger's knowledge of that fact about him should excite in an honest man.

"It 's my business to know people."

"I don't know you."

"That also is my business," smiled M. Guillaume. "But in this case we will not be too business-like. I will waive my advantage, M. de Roustache."

"You called yourself Guillaume," said Paul with a suspicious glance.

"I was inviting you to intimacy. My name is Guillaume—Guillaume Sévier, at your service."

"Sévier? The—?"

"Precisely. Don't be uneasy. My business is not with you." He touched his arm. "Your reasons for a midnight walk are nothing to me; young men take these fancies, and—well, the innkeeper says the Countess is handsome. But I am bound to admit that his description of the Count by no means tallies with the appearance of the gentleman who talked with you last night."

"Who talked with me! You were—?"

"I was there—behind a bush a little way down the hill."

"Upon my word, sir—"

"Oh, I had my business too. But for the moment listen to something that concerns you. The Count is not yet thirty, his eyes are large and dreamy, his hair long, he wears no moustache, his manner is melancholy, there is no air of bravado about him. Do I occasion you surprise?"

Paul de Roustache swore heartily.

"Then," he ended, "all I can say is

that I should like ten minutes alone with the fellow who made a fool of me last night, whoever he is."

Again Guillaume—as he wished to be called—touched his companion's arm.

"I too have a matter to discuss with that gentleman," he said. Paul looked surprised. "M. de Roustache," Guillaume continued with an insinuating smile, "is not ignorant of recent events; he moves in the world of affairs. I think we might help one another. And there is no harm in being popular with the—with—er—my department, instead of being—well, rather unpopular, eh, my dear M. de Roustache?"

Paul did not contest this insinuation nor show any indignation at it; the wink which accompanied it he had the self-respect to ignore.

"What do you want from him?" he asked, discerning Guillaume's point, and making straight for it.

"Merely some papers he has."

"What do you want the papers for?"

"To enable us to know whom we ought to watch."

"Is the affair political or—?"

"Oh, political—not in your line." Paul frowned. "Forgive my little joke," apologised M. Guillaume.

"And he 's got them?"

"Oh, yes—at least, we have very little doubt of it."

"Perhaps he 's destroyed them."

Guillaume laughed softly. "Ah, my dear sir," said he, "he would n't do that. While he keeps them he is safe, he is important, he might become—well, richer than he is."

Paul shot a quick glance at his companion.

"How do you mean to get the papers?"

"I 'm instructed to buy. But if he 's honest, he won't sell. Still I must have them."

"Tell me his name."

"Oh, by all means—Captain Dieppe."

"Ah, I 've heard of him. He was in Brazil, was n't he?"

"Yes, and in Bulgaria."

"Spain too, I fancy?"

"Dear me, I was n't aware of that," said Guillaume, with some vexation. "But it 's neither here nor there. Can I count on your assistance?"

"But what the devil does he pretend to be the Count for?"

"Forgive the supposition, but perhaps he imagined that your business was what mine is. Then he would like to throw you off the scent by concealing his identity."

"By heaven, and I nearly—!"

"Nearly did what, dear M. de Roustache?" said old Guillaume very softly. "Nearly dragged in the name of Madame la Comtesse, were you going to say?"

"How do you know anything—?" began Paul.

"A guess—on my honour a guess: You affect the ladies, eh? Oh, we 're not such strangers as you think." He spoke in a more imperious tone: it was almost threatening. "I think you must help me, Monsieur Paul," said he.

His familiarity, which was certainly no accident, pointed more precisely the vague menace of his demand.

But Paul was not too easily frightened.

"All right," said he, "but I must get something out of it, you know."

"On the day I get the papers—by whatever means—you shall receive ten thousand francs. And I will not interfere with your business. Come, my proposal is handsome, you must allow."

"Well, tell me what to do."

"You shall write a note, addressed to the Count, telling him you must see him on a matter which deeply touches his interest and his honour."

"How much do you know?" Paul broke in suspiciously.

"I knew nothing till last night; now I am beginning to know. But listen. The innkeeper is my friend; he will manage that this note shall be delivered—not to the Count, but to Dieppe; if any question arises, he 'll say you described the gentle-

man beyond mistake, and in the note you will refer to last night's interview. He won't suspect that I have undeceived you. Well then, in the note you will make a rendezvous with him. He will come, either for fun or because he thinks he can serve his friend—the Count or the Countess, whichever it may be. If I don't offend your susceptibilities, I should say it was the Countess. Oh, I am judging only by general probability."

"Supposing he comes—what then?"

"Why, when he comes, I shall be there—visible. And you will be there invisible—unless cause arises for you also to become visible. But the details can be settled later. Come, will you write the letter?"

Paul de Roustache thought a moment, nodded, rose, and was about to follow Guillaume into the inn. But he stopped again and laid a hand on his new friend's shoulder.

"If your innkeeper is so intelligent and so faithful—"

"The first comes from heaven," shrugged Guillaume. "The second is, all the world over, a matter of money, my friend."

"Of course. Well then, he might take another note."

"To the other Count?"

"Why, no."

"Not yet, eh?"

Paul forced a rather wry smile. "You have experience, Monsieur Guillaume," he confessed.

"To the Countess, is n't it? I see no harm in that. I ask you to help in my business; I observe my promise not to interfere with yours. He is intelligent; we will make him faithful: he shall take two notes by all means, my friend."

With the advice and assistance of Guillaume the two notes were soon written: the first was couched much in the terms suggested by that ingenious old schemer, the second was more characteristic of Paul himself and of the trade which Paul had joined. "It would grieve me pro-

foundly," the precious missive ran, "to do anything to distress you. But I have suffered very seriously, and not in my purse only. Unless you will act fairly by me, I must act for myself. If I do not receive fifty thousand francs in twenty-four hours, I turn to the only other quarter open to me. I am to be found at the inn. There is no need of a signature; you will remember your—Friend."

Guillaume put on his spectacles and read it through twice.

"Excellent, Monsieur Paul!" said he. "It is easy to detect a practised hand." And when Paul swore at him, he laughed the more, finding much entertainment in mocking the rascal whom he used.

Yet in this conduct there was a rashness little befitting Guillaume's age and Guillaume's profession. Paul was not a safe man to laugh at. If from time to time, in the way of business, he was obliged to throw a light brighter than he would have preferred on his own char-

acter, he did not therefore choose to be made the subject of raillery. And if it was not safe to mock him, neither was it very safe to talk of money to him. The thought of money—of thousands of francs, easily convertible into pounds, marks, dollars, florins, or whatever chanced to be the denomination of the country to which free and golden-winged steps might lead him—had a very inflaming effect on M. Paul de Roustache's imagination. The Baron von Englebaden had started the whole of that troublesome affair by boasting of the number of thousands of marks which had gone to the making of the Baroness's necklace. And now M. Guillaume—rash M. Guillaume—talked of bribing Captain Dieppe. Bribery means money; if the object is important it means a large amount of money: and presumably the object is important and the scale of expenditure correspondingly liberal, when such a comfortable little *douceur* as ten thousand francs is readily promised as the reward of inci-

dental assistance. Following this train of thought, Paul's mind fixed itself with some persistency on two points. The first was modest, reasonable, definite; he would see the colour of Guillaume's money before the affair went further; he would have his ten thousand francs, or at least a half of them, before he lent any further aid by word or deed. But the second idea was larger; it was also vaguer, and, although it hardly seemed less reasonable or natural to the brain which conceived it, it could scarcely be said to be as justifiable; at any rate it did not admit of being avowed as frankly to Guillaume himself. In fact Paul was wondering how much money Guillaume proposed to pay for Captain Dieppe's honour (in case that article proved to be in the market), and, further, where and in what material form that money was. Would it be gold? Why, hardly; when it comes to thousands of anything, the coins are not handy to carry about. Would it be a draft? That is a safe mode

of conveying large sums, but it has its disadvantages in affairs where secrecy is desired and ready money indispensable. Would it be notes? There were risks here—but also conveniences. And Guillaume seemed bold as well as wary. Moreover Guillaume's coat was remarkably shabby, his air very unassuming, and his manner of life at the hotel frugality itself; such a playing of the *vacuus viator* might be meant to deceive not only the landlord of the Aquila Nera, but also any other predatory persons whom Guillaume should encounter in the course of his travels. Yes, some of it would be in notes. Paul de Roustache bade the serving-maid bring him a bottle of wine, and passed an hour in consuming it very thoughtfully.

Guillaume returned from his conversation with the innkeeper just as the last glass was poured out. To Paul's annoyance he snatched it up and drained it—an act of familiarity that reached insolence.

"To the success of our enterprise!" said he, grinning at his discomfited companion. "All goes well. The innkeeper knows the Countess's maid, and the note will reach the Countess by midday; I have described Dieppe to him most accurately, and he will hang about till he gets a chance of delivering the second note to him, or seeing it delivered."

"And what are we to do?" asked Paul, still sour and still thoughtful.

"As regards the Countess, nothing. If the money comes, good for you. If not, I presume you will, at your own time, open communications with the Count?"

"It is possible," Paul admitted.

"Very," said M. Guillaume dryly. "And as regards Dieppe our course is very plain. I am at the rendezvous, waiting for him, by half-past six. You will also be at, or near, the rendezvous. We will settle more particularly how it is best to conduct matters when we see the lie of the ground. No general can

arrange his tactics without inspecting the battlefield, eh? And moreover we can't tell what the enemy's dispositions—or disposition—may turn out to be."

"And meanwhile there is nothing to do?"

"Nothing? On the contrary—breakfast, a smoke, and a nap," corrected Guillaume in a contented tone. "Then, my friend, we shall be ready for anything that may occur—for anything in the world we shall be ready."

"I wonder if you will," thought Paul de Roustache, resentfully eyeing the glass which M. Guillaume had emptied.

It remains to add only that, on the advice and information of the innkeeper, the Cross on the roadside up the hill behind the village had been suggested as the rendezvous, and that seven in the evening had seemed a convenient hour to propose for the meeting. For Guillaume had no reason to suppose that a prior engagement would take the Captain to the same neighbourhood at six.

CHAPTER V

THE RENDEZVOUS BY THE CROSS

Beneath the reserved and somewhat melancholy front which he generally presented to the world, the Count of Fieramondi was of an ardent and affectionate disposition. Rather lacking, perhaps, in resolution and strength of character, he was the more dependent on the regard and help of others, and his fortitude was often unequal to the sacrifices which his dignity and his pride demanded. Yet the very pride which led him into positions that he could not endure made it well-nigh impossible for him to retreat. This disposition, an honourable but not altogether a happy one, serves to explain both the uncompromising attitude which he had assumed in his dispute with his

wife, and the misery of heart which had betrayed itself in the poem he read to Captain Dieppe, with its indirect but touching appeal to his friend's sympathy.

Now his resolve was growing weaker as the state of hostilities, his loneliness, the sight of that detestable barricade, became more and more odious to him. He began to make excuses for the Countess —not indeed for all that she had done (for her graver offences were unknown to him), but for what he knew of, for the broken promise and the renewal of acquaintance with Paul de Roustache. He imputed to her a picturesque penitence and imagined her, on her side of the barricade, longing for a pardon she dared not ask and a reconciliation for which she could hardly venture to hope; he went so far as to embody these supposed feelings of hers in a graceful little poem addressed to himself and entitled, "To My Cruel Andrea." In fine the Count was ready to go on his knees if he received proper encouragement. Here his

pride had its turn: this encouragement he must have; he would not risk an interview, a second rebuff, a repetition of that insolence of manner with which he had felt himself obliged to charge the Countess or another slamming of the door in his face, such as had offended him so justly and so grievously in those involuntary interviews which had caused him to change his apartments. But now —the thought came to him as the happiest of inspirations—he need expose himself to none of these humiliations. Fortune had provided a better way. Shunning direct approaches with all their dangers, he would use an intermediary. By Heaven's kindness the ideal ambassador was ready to his hand—a man of affairs, accustomed to delicate negotiations, yet (the Count added) honourable, true, faithful, and tender-hearted. "My friend Dieppe will rejoice to serve me," he said to himself with more cheerfulness than he had felt since first the barricade had reared its hated front. He sent his ser-

vant to beg the favour of Dieppe's company.

At the moment—which, to be precise, was four o'clock in the afternoon—no invitation could have been more unwelcome to Captain Dieppe. He had received his note from the hands of a ragged urchin as he strolled by the river an hour before: its purport rather excited than alarmed him; but the rendezvous mentioned was so ill-chosen, from his point of view, that it caused him dismay. And he had in vain tried to catch sight of the Countess or find means of communicating with her without arousing suspicion. He had other motives too for shrinking from such expressions of friendliness as he had reason to anticipate from his host. But he did not expect anything so disconcerting as the proposal which the Count actually laid before him when he unwillingly entered his presence.

"Go to her—go to her on your behalf?" he exclaimed in a consternation which luckily passed for a modest dis-

trust of his qualifications for the task. "But, my dear friend, what am I to say?"

"Say that I love her," said the Count in his low, musical tones. "Say that beneath all differences, all estrangements, lies my deep, abiding, unchanging love."

Statements of this sort the Captain preferred to make, when occasion arose, on his own behalf.

"Say that I know I have been hard to her, that I recede from my demand, that I will be content with her simple word that she will not, without my knowledge, hold any communication with the person she knows of."

The Captain now guessed—or at least very shrewdly suspected—the position of affairs. But he showed no signs of understanding.

"Tell her," pursued the Count, laying his hand on Dieppe's shoulder and speaking almost as ardently as though he were addressing his wife herself, "that I never suspected her of more than a little levity, and that I never will or could."

Dieppe found himself speculating how much the Count's love and trust might induce him to include in the phrase "a little levity."

"That she should listen—I will not say to love-making—but even to gallantry, to a hint of admiration, to the least attempt at flirtation, has never entered my head about my Emilia."

The Captain, amid all his distress, marked the name.

"I trust her—I trust her!" cried the Count, raising his hands in an obvious stress of emotion, "as I trust myself, as I would trust my brother, my bosom friend. Yes, my dear friend, as I now trust you yourself. Go to her and say, 'I am Andrea's friend, his trusted friend. I am the messenger of love. Give me your love—'"

"What?" cried the Captain. The words sounded wonderfully attractive.

"'Give me your love to carry back to him.'"

"Oh, exactly," murmured the Captain, relapsing into altruistic gloom.

"Then all will be forgiven between us. Only our love will be remembered. And you, my friend, will have the happiness of seeing us reunited, and of knowing that two grateful hearts thank you. I can imagine no greater joy."

"It would certainly be—er—intensely gratifying," murmured Dieppe.

"You would remember it all your life. It is not a thing a man gets the chance of doing often."

"No," agreed the Captain; but he thought to himself, "Deuce take it, he talks as if he were doing me a favour!"

"My friend, you look sad; you don't seem—"

"Oh, yes, I do—yes, I am," interrupted the Captain, hastily assuming, or trying to assume, a cheerful expression. "But—"

"I understand—I understand. You doubt yourself?"

"That 's it," assented the Captain very truthfully.

"Your tact, your discretion, your

knowledge of women?" (Dieppe had never in his life doubted any of these things; but he let the accusation pass.) "Don't be afraid. Emilia will like you. I know that Emilia will like you. And you will like her. I know it."

"You think so?" No intonation could have expressed greater doubt.

"I am certain of it; and when two people like one another, all goes easily."

"Well, not always," said the Captain, whose position made him less optimistic.

The Count felt in his waistcoat-pocket. Dieppe sat looking down towards the floor with a frown on his face. He raised his eyes to find the Count holding out his hand towards him; in the open palm of it lay a wedding-ring.

"Take it back to her," said the Count.

"Really had n't you better do that yourself?" expostulated the Captain, who felt himself hard driven by fate.

"No," said the Count, firmly. "I leave it all to you. Put it on her finger and say, 'This is the pledge of love—of love

renewed—of Andrea's undying love for you.'" He thrust the symbol of bliss into Captain Dieppe's most reluctant hand. The Captain sat and looked at it in a horrified fascination.

"You will do it for me?" urged the Count. "You can't refuse! Ah, my friend, if my sorrow does n't move you, think of hers. She is alone there in that wing of the house—even her cousin, who was with her, was obliged to leave her three days ago. There she sits, thinking of her faults, poor child, in solitude! Alas, it is only too likely in tears! I can't bear to think of her in tears."

The Captain quite understood that feeling; he had seen her in them.

"You will help us? Your noble nature will force you to it!"

After a moment's hesitation, pardonable surely in weak humanity, Dieppe put the Countess's wedding-ring in his pocket, rose to his feet, and with a firm unfaltering face held out his hand to his friend and host.

"I can refuse you nothing," he said, in most genuine emotion. "I will do what you ask. May it bring happiness to—to —to all of us!" He wrung the Count's hand with a grip that spoke of settled purpose. "You shall hear how I fare very soon," he said, as he made for the door.

The Count nodded hopefully, and, when he was left alone, set to work on a little lyric of joy, with which to welcome the return of his forgiven and forgiving spouse.

But it was hard on Captain Dieppe; the strictest moralist may admit that without endangering his principles. Say the Captain had been blameworthy; still his punishment was heavy—heavy and most woefully prompt. His better nature, his finer feelings, his instincts of honour and loyalty, might indeed respond to the demand made on them by the mission with which his friend entrusted him. But the demand was heavy, the call grievous. Where he had pictured joy,

there remained now only renunciation; he had dreamed of conquest; there could be none, save the hardest and least grateful, the conquest of himself. Firm the Captain might be, but sad he must be. He could still serve the Countess (was not Paul de Roustache still dangerous?), but he could look for no reward. Small wonder that the meeting, whose risks and difficulty had made it seem before only the sweeter, now lost all its delight, and became the hardest of ordeals, the most severe and grim of duties.

If this was the Captain's mood, that of the lady whom he was to meet could be hardly more cheerful. If conscience seemed to trouble her less, and unhappy love not to occupy her mind as it governed his, the external difficulties of her position occasioned her greater distress and brought her near despair. Paul de Roustache's letter had been handed to her by her servant, with a smile half reproachful, half mocking; she had seized it, torn it open, and read it. She under-

stood its meaning; she saw that the dreaded crisis had indeed come; and she was powerless to deal with it, or to avert the catastrophe it threatened. She sat before it now, very near to doing just what Count Andrea hated to think of and Captain Dieppe could not endure to see; and as she read and re-read the hateful thing she moaned softly to herself:

"Oh, how could I be so silly! How could I put myself in such a position? How could I consent to anything of the sort? I don't know what 'll happen. I have n't got fifty thousand francs! Oh, Emilia, how could you do it? I don't know what to do! And I 'm all alone—alone to face this fearful trouble!" Indeed the Count, led no doubt by the penetrating sympathy of love, seemed to have divined her feelings with a wonderful accuracy.

She glanced up at the clock; it was nearly five. The smile that came on her face was sad and timid; yet it was a smile of hope. "Perhaps he 'll be able to help

me," she thought. "He has no money, no—only fifty francs, poor man! But he seems to be brave—oh, yes, he 's brave. And I think he 's clever. I 'll go to the meeting-place and take the note. He 's the only chance." She rose and walked to a mirror. She certainly looked a little less woe-begone now, and she examined her appearance with an earnest criticism. The smile grew more hopeful, a little more assured, as she murmured to herself, "I think he 'll help me, if he can, you know; because—well, because—" For an instant she even laughed. "And I rather like him too, you know," she ended by confiding to the mirror. These latter actions and words were not in such complete harmony with Count Andrea's mental picture of the lady on the other side of the barricade.

Betaking herself to the room from which she had first beheld Captain Dieppe's face—not, as the Count would have supposed, as a consequence of any design, but by the purest and most un-

expected chance—she arrayed herself in a short skirt and thick boots, and wrapped a cloak round her, for a close, misty rain was already falling, and the moaning of the wind in the trees promised a stormy evening. Then she stole out and made for the gate in the right wall of the gardens. The same old servant who had brought the note was there to let her out.

"You will be gone long, Contessa?" she asked.

"No, Maria, not long. If I am asked for, say I am lying down."

"Who should ask for you? The Count?"

"Not very likely," she replied with a laugh, in which the servant joined. "But if he does, I am absolutely not to be seen, Maria." And with another little laugh she began to skirt the back of the gardens so as to reach the main road, and thus make her way by the village to the Cross on the hill, and the little hut in the hollow behind it.

Almost at the same moment Captain Dieppe, cursing his fortune, his folly, and the weather, with the collar of his coat turned up, his hat crushed hard on his head, and (just in case of accidents) his revolver in his pocket, came out into the garden and began to descend the hill towards where the stepping-stones gave him passage across the river. Thus he also would reach the village, pass through it, and mount the hill to the Cross. His way was shorter and his pace quicker. To be there before the lady would be only polite; it would also give him a few minutes in which to arrange his thoughts and settle what might be the best way to open to her the new—the very new—things that he had to say. In the preoccupation of these he thought little of his later appointment at seven o'clock—although it was in view of this that he had slipped the revolver into his pocket.

Finally, just about the same time also, Guillaume was rehearsing to Paul de Roustache exactly what they were to do

and where their respective parts began and terminated. Paul was listening with deep attention, with a curious smile on his face, and with the inner reflection that things in the end might turn out quite differently from what his astute companion supposed would be the case. Moreover—also just in case of accidents—both of these gentlemen, it may be mentioned, had slipped revolvers into their pockets. Such things may be useful when one carries large sums of money to a rendezvous; equally so in case one hopes to carry them back from it. The former was M. Guillaume's condition, the latter that of Paul de Roustache. On the whole there seemed a possibility of interesting incidents occurring by or in the neighbourhood of the Cross on the hillside above the village.

What recked the Count of Fieramondi of that? He was busy composing his lyric in honour of the return of his forgiven and forgiving Countess. Of what was happening he had no thought.

And not less ignorant of these possible incidents was a lady who this same evening stood in the courtyard of the only inn of the little town of Sasellano, where the railway ended, and whence the traveller to the Count of Fieramondi's Castle must take a carriage and post-horses.

The lady demanded horses, protested, raged; most urgent business called her to pursue her journey, she said. But the landlord hesitated and shook his head.

"It 's good twelve miles and against collar almost all the way," he urged.

"I will pay what you like," she cried.

"But see, the rain falls—it has fallen for two hours. The water will be down from the hills, and the stream will be in flood before you reach the ford. Your Excellency had best sleep here to-night. Indeed your Excellency must."

"I won't," said her Excellency flatly.

And at that point—which may be called the direct issue—the dispute must now be left.

CHAPTER VI

THE HUT IN THE HOLLOW

Geography, in itself a tiresome thing, concerned with such soulless matters as lengths, depths, heights, breadths, and the like, gains interest so soon as it establishes a connection with the history of kingdoms, and the ambitions, passions, or fortunes of mankind; so that men may pore over a map with more eagerness than the greatest of romances can excite, or scan a countryside with a keenness that the beauty of no picture could evoke. To Captain Dieppe, a soldier, even so much apology was not necessary for the careful scrutiny of topographical features which was his first act on reaching the Cross on the hillside. His examination, hindered by increasing darkness

and mist, yet yielded him a general impression correct enough.

Standing with his back to the Cross, he had on his right hand the slope down to the village which he had just ascended; on his left the road fell still more precipitately in zigzag curves. He could not see it where it reached the valley and came to the river; had he been able, he would have perceived that it ran down to and crossed the ford to which the landlord of the inn at Sasellano had referred. But immediately facing him he could discern the river in its bottom, and could look down over the steep grassy declivity which descended to it from the point at which he stood; there was no more than room for the road, and on the road hardly room for a vehicle to pass another, or itself to turn. On all three sides the ground fell, and he would have seemed to stand on a watch-tower had it not been that behind him, at the back of the cross, the upward slope of grass showed that the road did not surmount

the hill, but hung on to and skirted its side some fifty paces from the top. Yet even where he was he found himself exposed to the full stress of the weather, which had now increased to a storm of wind and rain. The time of his earlier appointment was not quite due; but the lady knew her way. With a shiver the Captain turned and began to scramble up towards the summit. The sooner he found the shepherd's hut the better: if it were open, he would enter; if not, he could at least get some shelter under the lee of it. But he trusted that the Countess would keep her tryst punctually: she must be come and gone before seven o'clock, or she would risk an encounter with her enemy, Paul de Roustache. "However I could probably smuggle her away; and at least he should n't speak to her," he reflected, and was somewhat comforted.

At the top of the hill the formation was rather peculiar. The crown once reached, the ground dipped very sud-

denly from all sides, forming a round depression in shape like a basin and at the lowest point some twenty feet beneath the top of its enclosing walls. In this circular hollow—not in the centre, but no more than six feet from the base of the slope by which the Captain approached—stood the shepherd's hut. Its door was open, swinging to and fro as the gusts of wind rose and fell. The Captain ran down and entered. There was nothing inside but a rough stool, a big and heavy block, something like those one may see in butcher's shops (probably it had served the shepherds for seat or table, as need arose), and five or six large trusses of dry maize-straw flung down in a corner. The place was small, rude, and comfortless enough, but if the hanging door, past which the rain drove in fiercely, could be closed, the four walls of sawn logs would afford decent shelter from the storm during the brief period of the conference which the Captain awaited.

Dieppe looked at his watch; he could just see the figures—it was ten minutes to six. Mounting again to the summit, he looked round. Yes, there she was, making her way up the hill, painfully struggling with refractory cloak and skirt. A moment later she joined him and gave him her hand, panting out:

"Oh, I 'm so glad you 're here! There 's the most fearful trouble."

There was, of more than one kind; none knew it better than Dieppe.

"One need not, all the same, get any wetter," he remarked. "Come into the hut, madame."

She paid no heed to his words, but stood there looking forlornly round. But the next instant the Captain enforced his invitation by catching hold of her arm and dragging her a pace or two down the hill, while he threw himself on the ground, his head just over the top of the eminence. "Hush," he whispered. His keen ear had caught a footstep on the road, although darkness and mist prevented him

from seeing who approached. It was barely six. Was Paul de Roustache an hour too early?

"What is it?" she asked in a low, anxious voice. "Is anybody coming? Oh, if it should be Andrea!"

"It 's not the Count, but—Come down into the hut, madame. You must n't be seen."

Now she obeyed his request. Dieppe stood in the doorway a moment, listening. Then he pushed the door shut—it opened inwards—and with some effort set the wooden block against it.

"That will keep out the rain," said he, "and—and anything else, you know."

They were in dense darkness. The Captain took a candle and a cardboard box of matches from an inner pocket. Striking a match after one or two efforts (for matches and box were both damp), he melted the end of the candle and pressed it on the block till it adhered. Then he lit the wick. The lady watched him admiringly.

"You seem ready for anything," she said. But the Captain shook his head sorrowfully, as he laid his match-box down on a dry spot on the block.

"We have no time to lose—" he began.

"No," she agreed, and opening her cloak she searched for something. Finding the object she sought, she held it out to him. "I got that this afternoon. Read it," she said. "It 's from the man you met last night—Paul de Roustache. The 'Other quarter' means Andrea. And that means ruin."

Captain Dieppe gently waved the letter aside.

"No, you must read it," she urged.

He took it, and bending down to the candle read it. "Just what it would be," he said.

"I can't explain anything, you know," she added hastily, with a smile half rueful, half amused.

"To me, at least, there 's no need you should." He paused a moment in hesitation or emotion. Then he put his hand

in his waistcoat-pocket, drew forth a small object, and held it out towards his companion between his finger and thumb. In the dim light she did not perceive its nature.

"This," said the Captain, conscientiously and even textually delivering the message with which he was charged, "is the pledge of love."

"Captain Dieppe!" she cried, leaping back and blushing vividly. "Really I—! At such a time—under the circ— And what is it? I can't see."

"The pledge of love renewed"—the Captain went on in a loyal hastiness, but not without the sharpest pang—"of Andrea's undying love for you."

"Of Andrea's—!" She stopped, presumably from excess of emotion. Her lips were parted in a wondering smile, her eyes danced merrily even while they questioned. "What in the world is it?" she asked again.

"Your wedding-ring," said the Captain with sad and impressive solemnity, and,

on the pretext of snuffing the candle which flickered and guttered in the draught, he turned away. Thus he did not perceive the uncontrollable bewilderment which appeared on his companion's face.

"Wedding-ring!" she murmured.

"He sends it back again to you," explained the Captain, still busy with the candle.

A long-drawn "O—oh!" came from her lips, its lengthened intonation seeming to express the dawning of comprehension. "Yes, of course," she added very hastily.

"He loves you," said the Captain, facing her—and his task—again. "He can't bear his own sorrow, nor to think of yours. He withdraws his demand; your mere word to hold no communication with the person you know of, without his knowledge, contents him. I am his messenger. Give me your love to—to carry back to him."

"Did he tell you to say all that?" she asked.

"Ah, madame, should I say it otherwise? Should I who—" With a mighty effort he checked himself, and resumed in constrained tones. "My dear friend the Count bade me put this ring on your finger, madame, in token of your—your reunion with him."

Her expression now was decidedly puzzling; certainly she was struggling with some emotion, but it was not quite clear with what.

"Pray do it then," she said, and, drawing off the stout little gauntlet she wore, she presented her hand to the Captain. Bowing low, he took it lightly, and placed the holy symbol on the appropriate finger. But he could not make up his mind to part from the hand without one lingering look; and he observed with some surprise that the ring was considerably too large for the finger. "It 's very loose," he murmured, taking perhaps a sad, whimsical pleasure in the conceit of seeing something symbolical in the fact to which he called attention; in truth the ring fitted

so ill as to be in great danger of dropping off.

"Yes—er—it is rather loose. I—I hate tight rings, don't you?" She smiled with vigour (if the expression be allowable) and added, "I 've grown thinner too, I suppose."

"From grief?" asked he, and he could not keep a touch of bitterness out of his voice.

"Well, anxiety," she amended. "I think I 'd better carry the ring in my pocket. It would be a pity to lose it." She took off the symbol and dropped it, somewhat carelessly it must be confessed, into a side-pocket of her coat. Then she seated herself on the stool, and looked up at the Captain. Her smile became rather mocking, as she observed to Captain Dieppe:

"Andrea has charged you with this commission since—since last night, I suppose?"

The words acted—whether by the intention of their utterer or not—as a spark

to the Captain's ardour. Loyal he would be to his friend and to his embassy, but that she should suspect him of insincerity, that she should not know his love, was more than he could bear.

"Ah," he said, seizing her ungloved hand again, "since last night indeed! Last night it was my dream—my mad dream— Ah, don't be angry! Don't draw your hand away."

The lady's conduct indicated that she proposed to assent to both these requests; she smiled still and she did not withdraw her hand from Dieppe's eager grasp.

"My honour is pledged," he went on, "but suffer me once to kiss this hand now that it wears no ring, to dream that it need wear none, that you are free. Ah, Countess, ah, Emilia—for once let me call you Emilia?"

"For once, if you like. Don't get into the habit of it," she advised.

"No, I 'll only think of you by that name."

"I should n't even do as much as that.

It would be a—I mean you might forget and call me it, you know."

"Never was man so unhappy as I am," he cried in a low but intense voice. "But I am wrong. I must remember my trust. And you—you love the Count?"

"I am very fond of Andrea," said she, almost in a whisper. She seemed to suffer sorely from embarrassment, for she added hastily, "Don't—don't press me about that any more." Yet she was smiling.

The Captain knelt on one knee and kissed her hand very respectfully. The mockery passed out of her smile, and she said in a voice that for a moment was grave and tender:

"Thank you. I shall like to remember that. Because I think you 're a brave man and a true friend, Captain Dieppe."

"I thank God for helping me to remain a gentleman," said he; and, although his manner was (according to his custom) a little pronounced and theatrical, he spoke with a very genuine feeling. She pressed her hand on his before she drew it away.

"You 'll be my friend?" he asked.

She paused before she replied, looking at him intently; then she answered in a low voice, speaking slowly and deliberately:

"I will be all to you that I can and that you ask me to be."

"I have your word, dear friend?"

"You have my word. If you ask me, I will redeem it." She looked at him still as though she had said a great thing—as though a pledge had passed between them, and a solemn promise from her to him.

What seemed her feeling found an answer in Dieppe. He pressed her for no more promises, he urged her to no more demonstration of affection towards him. But their eyes met, their glances conquered the dimness of the candle's light and spoke to one another. Rain beat and wind howled outside. Dieppe heard nothing but an outspoken confession that left honour safe and inviolate, and yet told him the sweetest thing that he could hear —a thing so sweet that for the instant its

sadness was forgotten. He had triumphed, though he could have no reward of victory. He was loved, though he might hear no words of love. But he could serve her still—serve her and save her from the danger and humiliation which, notwithstanding Count Andrea's softened mood, still threatened her. That he even owed her; for he did not doubt that the danger, and the solitude in which, but for him, it had to be faced, had done much to ripen and to quicken her regard for him. As for himself, with such a woman as the Countess in the case, he was not prepared to own the need of any external or accidental stimulus. Yet beauty distressed is beauty doubled; that is true all the world over, and, no doubt, it held good even for Captain Dieppe. He had been loyal—under the circumstances wonderfully loyal—to the Count; but he felt quite justified, if he proved equal to the task, in robbing his friend of the privilege of forgiveness—aye, and of the pleasure of paying fifty thousand

francs. He resolved that the Count of Fieramondi should never know of Paul de Roustache's threats against the Countess or of his demand for that exorbitant sum of money.

With most people in moments of exaltation to resolve that a result is desirable is but a preliminary to undertaking its realisation. Dieppe had more than his share of this temper. He bent down towards his new and dear friend, and said confidently:

"Don't distress yourself about this fellow—I 'll manage the whole affair without trouble or publicity." Yet he had no notion how his words were to be made good.

"You will?" she asked, with a confidence in the Captain apparently as great as his own.

"Certainly," said he, with a twirl of his moustache.

"Then I 'd better leave it to you and go home at once."

The inference was not quite what the

Captain had desired. But he accepted it with a tolerably good grace. When a man has once resisted temptation there is little to be gained, and something perhaps to be risked, by prolonging the interview.

"I suppose so," said he. "I 'll escort you as far as the village. But what 's the time?"

He took out his watch and held it down to the flame of the candle; the lady rose and looked, not over his shoulder, but just round his elbow.

"Ah, that 's curious," observed the Captain, regarding the hands of his watch. "How quickly the time has gone!"

"Very. But why is it curious?" she asked.

He glanced down at her face, mischievously turned up to his.

"Well, it 's not curious," he admitted, "but it is awkward."

"It 's only just seven."

"Precisely the hour of my appointment with Paul de Roustache."

"With Paul de Roustache?"

"Don't trouble yourself. All will be well."

"What appointment? Where are you to meet him?"

"By the Cross, on the road outside there."

"Heavens! If I were to meet him! He must n't see me!"

"Certainly not," agreed the Captain with cheerful confidence.

"But how are we to avoid—?"

"Ah, you put no real trust in me," murmured he in gentle reproach, and, it must be added, purely for the sake of gaining a moment's reflection.

"Could n't we walk boldly by him?" she suggested.

"He would recognise you to a certainty, even if he didn't me."

"Recognise me? Oh, I don't know. He does n't know me very well."

"What?" said the Captain, really a little astonished this time.

"And there 's the rain and—and the

night and—and all that," she murmured in some confusion.

"No man who has ever seen you—" began the Captain.

"Hush! What 's that?" whispered she, grasping his arm nervously. The Captain, recalled to the needs of the situation, abandoned his compliment, or argument, whichever it was, and listened intently.

There were voices outside the hut, some little way off, seeming to come from above, as though the speakers were on the crest of the hill. They were audible intermittently, but connectedly enough, as though their owners waited from time to time for a lull in the gusty wind before they spoke.

"Hold the lantern here. Why, it 's past seven! He ought to be here by now."

"We 've searched every inch of the ground."

"That 's Paul de Roustache," whispered the Captain.

"Perhaps he 's lying down out of the storm somewhere. Shall we shout?"

"Oh, if you like—but you risk being overheard. I 'm tired of the job."

"The ground dips here. Come, we must search the hollow. You must earn your reward, M. de Roustache."

The lady pressed Dieppe's arm. "I can't go now," she whispered.

"I 'm willing to earn it, but I 'd like to see it."

"What 's that down there?"

"You don't attend to my suggestion, M. Sévier."

"Sévier!" muttered the Captain, and a smile spread over his face.

"Call me Guillaume," came sharply from the voice he had first heard.

"Exactly," murmured Dieppe. "Call him anything except his name. Oh, exactly!"

"It looks like—like a building—a shed or something. Come, he may be in there."

"Oh!" murmured the lady. "You won't let them in?"

"They sha'n't see you," Dieppe reas-

sured her. "But listen, my dear friend, listen."

"Who 's the other? Sévier?"

"A gentleman who takes an interest in me. But silence, pray, silence, if you—if you 'll be guided by me."

"Let 's go down and try the door. If he 's not there, anyhow we can shelter ourselves till he turns up."

There was a pause. Feet could be heard climbing and slithering down the slippery grass slope.

"What if you find it locked?"

"Then I shall think some one is inside, and some one who has discovered reasons for not wishing to be met."

"And what will you do?" The voices were very near now, and Paul's discontented sneer made the Captain smile; but his hand sought the pocket where his revolver lay.

"I shall break it open—with your help, my friend."

"I give no more help, friend Sévier—or Guillaume, or what you like—till I see

my money. Deuce take it, the fellow may be armed!"

"I did n't engage you for a picnic, Monsieur Paul."

"It 's the pay, not the work, that 's in dispute, my friend. Come, you have the money, I suppose? Out with it!"

"Not a sou till I have the papers!"

The Captain nodded his head. "I was right, as usual," he was thinking to himself, as he felt his breast-pocket caressingly.

The wind rose to a gust and howled. The voices became inaudible. The Captain bent down and whispered.

"If they force the door open," he said, "or if I have to open it and go out, you 'd do well to get behind that straw there till you see what happens. They expect nobody but me, and when they 've seen me they won't search any more."

He saw, with approval and admiration, that she was calm and cool.

"Is there danger?" she asked.

"No," said he. "But one of them

wants some papers I have, and has apparently engaged the other to assist him. M. de Roustache feels equal to two jobs, it seems. I wonder if he knows whom he 's after, though."

"Would they take the papers by force?" Her voice was very anxious, but still not terrified.

"Very likely—if I won't part with them. Don't be uneasy. I sha'n't forget your affair."

She pressed his arm gratefully, and drew back till she stood close to the trusses of straw, ready to seek a hiding-place in case of need. She was not much too soon. A man hurled himself violently against the door. The upper part gave and gaped an inch or two; the lower stood firm, thanks to the block of wood that barred its opening. Even as the assault was delivered against the door, Dieppe had blown out the candle. In darkness he and she stood waiting and listening.

"Lend a hand. We shall do it together," cried the voice of M. Guillaume.

"I 'll be hanged if I move without five thousand francs!"

Dieppe put up both hands and leant with all his weight against the upper part of the door. He smiled at his prescience when Guillaume flung himself against it once more. Now there was no yielding, no opening—not a chink. Guillaume was convinced.

"Curse you, you shall have the money," they heard him say. "Come, hold the lantern here."

CHAPTER VII

THE FLOOD ON THE RIVER

That Paul de Roustache came to the rendezvous, where he had agreed to meet the Count, in the company and apparently in the service of M. Guillaume, who was not at all concerned with the Count but very much interested in the man who had borrowed his name, afforded tolerably conclusive evidence that Paul had been undeceived, and that if either party had been duped in regard to the meeting it was Captain Dieppe. Never very ready to adopt such a conclusion as this, Dieppe was none the less forced to it by the pressure of facts. Moreover he did not perceive any safe, far less any glorious, issue from the situation either for his companion or for himself. His honour was

doubly involved; the Countess's reputation and the contents of his breast-pocket alike were in his sole care; and just outside the hut were two rascals, plainly resolute, no less plainly unscrupulous, the one threatening the lady, the other with nefarious designs against the breast-pocket. They had joined hands, and now delivered a united attack against both of the Captain's treasured trusts. "In point of fact," he reflected with some chagrin, "I have for this once failed to control events." He brightened up almost immediately. "Never mind," he thought, "it may still be possible to take advantage of them." And he waited, all on the alert for his chance. His companion observed, with a little vexation, with more admiration, that he seemed to have become unconscious of her presence, or, at best, to consider her only as a responsibility.

The besiegers spoke no more in tones audible within the hut. Putting eye and ear alternately to the crevice between door and door-post, Dieppe saw the lan-

tern's light and heard the crackle of paper. Then he just caught, or seemed to catch, the one word, said in a tone of finality, "Five!" Then came more crackling. Next a strange, sudden circle of light revolved before the Captain's eye; and then there was light no more. The lantern had been lifted, swung round in the air, and flung away. Swift to draw the only inference, Dieppe turned his head. As he did so there rang out a loud oath in Guillaume's voice; it was followed by an odd, dull thud.

"Quick, behind the trusses!" whispered Dieppe. "I 'm going out."

Without a word she obeyed him, and in a moment was well hidden. For an instant more Dieppe listened. Then he hurled the wooden block away; its weight, so great before, seemed nothing to him now in his excitement. The crack of a shot came from outside. Pulling the door violently back, Dieppe rushed out. Two or three paces up the slope stood Guillaume, his back to the hut, his arm still

levelled at a figure which had just topped the summit of the eminence, and an instant later disappeared. Hearing Dieppe's rush, Guillaume turned, crying in uncontrollable agitation, "He 's robbed me, robbed me, robbed me!" Then he suddenly put both his hands up to his brow, clutching it tight as though he were in great pain, and, reeling and stumbling, at last fell and rolled down to the bottom of the hollow. For an instant the Captain hesitated. But Guillaume lay very still; and Guillaume had no quarrel with the Countess. His indecision soon ended, Dieppe ran, as if for his life, up the slope to the top of the hill. He disappeared; all was left dark and quiet at the hut; Guillaume did not stir, the lady did not stir; only the door, released from its confinement, began to flap idly to and fro again.

The Captain gained the summit, hardly conscious that one of those sudden changes of weather so common in hilly countries had passed over the landscape. The mist

was gone, rain fell no more, a sharp, clean breeze blew, the stars began to shine, and the moon rose bright. It was as though a curtain had been lifted. Dieppe's topographical observations stood him in good stead now and saved him some moments' consideration. The fugitive had choice of two routes. But he would not return to the village: he might have to answer awkward questions about M. Guillaume, his late companion, there. He would make in another direction—presumably towards the nearest inhabited spot, where he could look to get more rapid means of escape than his own legs afforded. He would follow the road to the left then, down the zigzags that must lead to the river, and to some means of crossing it. But he had gained a good start and had the figure of an active fellow. Dieppe risked a short cut, darted past the Cross and straight over the road, heading down towards the river, but taking a diagonal course to the left. His intent was to hit the road where the road hit the river, and

thus to cut off the man he pursued. His way would be shorter, but it would be rougher too; success or failure depended on whether the advantage or disadvantage proved the greater. As he ran, he felt for his revolver; but he did not take it out nor did he mean to use it save in the last resort. Captain Dieppe did not take life or maim limb without the utmost need; though a man of war, he did not suffer from blood fever. Besides he was a stranger in the country, with none to answer for him; and the credentials in his breast-pocket were not of the sort that he desired to produce for the satisfaction and information of the local custodians of the peace.

The grassy slope was both uneven and slippery. Moreover Dieppe had not allowed enough for the courage of the natives in the matter of gradients. The road, in fact, belied its cautious appearance. After three or four plausible zigzags, it turned to rash courses and ran headlong down to the ford—true, it had

excuse in the necessity of striking this spot—on a slope hardly less steep than that down which the Captain himself was painfully leaping with heels stuck deep in and body thrown well back. In the result Paul de Roustache comfortably maintained his lead, and when he came into his pursuer's view was no more than twenty yards from the river, the Captain being still a good fifty from the point at which he had hoped to be stationed before Paul came up

"I 'm done," panted the Captain, referring both to his chances of success and to his physical condition; and he saw with despair that across the ford the road rose as boldly and as steeply as it had descended on the near side of the stream.

Paul ran on and came to the edge of the ford. Negotiations might be feasible since conquest was out of the question: Dieppe raised his voice and shouted. Paul turned and looked. "I 'm a pretty long shot," thought the Captain, and he

thought it prudent to slacken his pace till he saw in what spirit his overtures were met. Their reception was not encouraging. Paul took his revolver from his pocket—the Captain saw the glint of the barrel—and waved it menacingly. Then he replaced it, lifted his hat jauntily in a mocking farewell, and turned to the ford again.

"Shall I go on?" asked the Captain, "or shall I give it up?" The desperate thought at last occurred: "Shall I get as near as I can and try to wing him?" He stood still for an instant, engaged in these considerations. Suddenly a sound struck his ear and caught his attention. It was the heavy, swishing noise of a deep body of water in rapid movement. His eyes flew down to the river.

"By God!" he muttered under his breath; and from the river his glance darted to Paul de Roustache. The landlord of the inn at Sasellano had not spoken without warrant. The stream ran high in flood, and Paul de Roustache stood

motionless in fear and doubt on the threshold of the ford.

"I 've got him," remarked the Captain simply, and he began to pace leisurely and warily down the hill. He was ready for a shot now—ready to give one too, if necessary. But his luck was again in the ascendant; he smiled and twirled his moustache as he walked along.

If it be pardonable—or even praiseworthy, as some moralists assert—to pity the criminal, while righteously hating the crime, a trifle of compassion may be spared for Paul de Roustache. In fact that gentleman had a few hours before arrived at a resolution which must be considered (for as a man hath, so shall it be demanded of him, in talents and presumably in virtues also) distinctly commendable. He had made up his mind to molest the Countess of Fieramondi no more—provided he got the fifty thousand francs from M. Guillaume. Up to this moment fortune—or, in recognition of the morality of the idea, may we not

say heaven?—had favoured his design. Obliged, in view of Paul's urgently expressed preference for a payment on account, to disburse five thousand francs, Guillaume had taken from his pocket a leather case of venerable age and opulent appearance. Paul was no more averse than Dieppe from taking a good chance. The production of the portfolio was the signal for a rapid series of decisive actions; for was not Dieppe inside the hut, and might not Dieppe share or even engross the contents of the portfolio? With the promptness of a man who has thoroughly thought out his plans, Paul had flung away the lantern, hit Guillaume on the forehead with the butt of his revolver, snatched the portfolio from his hand, and bolted up the slope that led from the hut to the summit; thence he ran down the road, not enjoying leisure to examine his prize, but sure that it contained more than the bare ten thousand francs for which he had modestly bargained. A humane man, he reflected, would stay by Guillaume,

bathe his brow, and nurse him back to health; for with a humane man life is more than property; and meanwhile the property, with Paul as its protector, would be far away. But now—well, in the first place, Dieppe was evidently not a humane man, and in the second, here was this pestilent river flooded to the edge of its banks, and presenting the most doubtful passage which had ever by the mockery of language been misnamed a ford. He was indeed between the devil and the deep sea—that devil of a Dieppe and the deep sea of the ford on the road from Sasellano. What was to be done?

The days of chivalry are gone; and the days of hanging or beheading for unnecessary or unjustified homicide are with us, to the great detriment of romance. Paul, like the Captain, did not desire a duel, although, like the Captain, he proposed to keep his revolver handy. And, after all, what was called a ford must be at least comparatively shallow. Give it a foot of depth in ordinary times. Let

it be three or four now. Still he could get across. With one last look at the Captain, who advanced steadily, although very slowly, Paul de Roustache essayed the passage. The precious portfolio was in an inner pocket, the hardly less precious revolver he grasped in one hand; and both his hands he held half outstretched on either side of him. The Captain watched his progress with the keenest interest and a generous admiration, and quickened his own pace so as to be in a position to follow the daring pioneer as rapidly as possible.

As far as depth was concerned, Paul's calculation was not far out. He travelled a third of his way and felt the ground level under him. He had reached the bottom of the river-bed, and the water was not up to his armpits. He took out the portfolio and thrust it in between his neck and his collar: it gave him a confined and choky feeling, but it was well out of water; and his right hand held the revolver well out of water too. Thus

prepared, yet hoping that the worst was over, he took another forward step. Breaking into a run, the Captain was by the edge of the stream the next moment, whipped out his revolver, pointed it at Paul, and cried, "Stop!" For although one does not mean to fire, it is often useful to create the impression that one does.

The action had its effect now, although not exactly as Dieppe had anticipated. Flurried by his double difficulty, Paul stopped again and glanced over his shoulder. He saw the barrel aimed at him; he could not risk disregarding the command, but he might forestall his pursuer's apparent intention. He tried to turn round, and effected half the revolution; thus he faced down-stream, and had his back to the full force of the current. Although no deeper than he had feared, the river was stronger; and in this attitude he offered a less firm resistance. In an instant he was swept off his feet, and carried headlong down-stream,

dropping his revolver and struggling to swim to the opposite bank.

"I can't afford to have this happen!" cried Dieppe, and, seeing how the current bore his enemy away, he ran swiftly some fifty yards down the bank, got ahead of Paul, and plunged in, again with the idea of cutting him off, but by water this time, since his plan had failed on land.

Here it is likely enough that the two gentlemen's difficulties and activities alike would have ended. Paul went under and came up again, a tangled, helpless heap of legs and arms; the Captain kept his head above water for the time, but could do nothing save follow the current which carried him straight down-stream. But by good luck the river took a sharp bend a hundred yards below the ford, and Dieppe perceived that by drifting he would come very near to the projecting curve of the bank. Paul was past noticing this chance or trying to avail himself of it. The Captain was swept down; at the right instant he made the one effort

for which he had husbanded his strength. He gathered his legs up under him, and he stood. The water was only half-way up his thigh, and he stood. "Now for you, my friend!" he cried. Paul came by, quite inanimate now to all appearance, floating broadside to the current. Leaning forward, the Captain caught him by the leg, throwing his own body back in an intense strain of exertion. He lost his footing and fell. "I must let him go," he thought, "or we shall both be done for." But the next moment he felt himself flung on the bank, and the tension on his arms relaxed. The current had thrown the two on the bank and pursued its own race round the promontory, bereft of its playthings. Drenched, huddled, hatless, they lay there.

"A very near thing indeed," said the Captain, panting hard and regarding Paul's motionless body with a grave and critical air of inquiry. The next moment he fell on his knees by his companion. "Perhaps he carries a flask—I 've none,"

he thought, and began to search Paul's pockets. He found what he sought and proceeded to unscrew the top.

Paul gasped and grunted. "He 's all right then," said the Captain. Paul's hand groped its way up to his collar, and made convulsive clutches. "I 'd better give him a little more room," mused Dieppe, and laid the flask down for a minute. "Ah, this is a queer cravat! No wonder he feels like choking. A portfolio! Ah, ah!" He took it out and pocketed it. Then he forced some brandy down Paul's throat, and undid his collar and his waistcoat. "A pocket inside the waistcoat! Very useful, very useful—and more papers, yes! Take a drop, my friend, it will do you good." Thus alternately ministering to Paul's bodily comfort and rifling his person of what valuables he carried, Dieppe offered to the philosophic mind a singular resemblance to a Finance Minister who takes a farthing off the duty on beer and puts a penny on the income tax.

The moon was high, but not bright

enough to read a small and delicate handwriting by. The Captain found himself in a tantalising position. He gave Paul some more brandy, laid down the packet of letters, and turned to the portfolio. It was large and official in appearance, and it had an ingenious clasp which baffled Dieppe. With a sigh he cut the leather top and bottom, and examined the prize.

"Ah, my dear Banque de France, even in this light I can recognise your charming, allegorical figures," he said with a smile. There were thirty notes—he counted them twice, for they were moist and very sticky. There was another paper. "This must be—" He rose to his feet and held the paper up towards the moon. "I can't read the writing," he murmured, "but I can see the figures —30,000. Ah, and that is 'Genoa'! Now to whom is it payable, I wonder!"

"What the devil are you doing?" growled Paul, sitting up with a shiver.

"My friend, I have saved your life," observed the Captain, impressively.

"That 's no reason for robbing me," was Paul's ungrateful but logically sound reply.

The Captain stooped and picked up the bundle of letters. Separating them one from another, he tore them into small fragments and scattered them over the stream. Paul watched him, sullen but without resistance. Dieppe turned to him.

"You have no possible claim against the Countess," he remarked; "no possible hold on her, Monsieur de Roustache."

Paul finished the flask for himself this time, shivered again, and swore pitifully. He was half-crying and cowed. "Curse the whole business!" he said. "But she had twenty thousand francs of my money."

The Captain addressed to him a question somewhat odd under the circumstances.

"On your honour as a gentleman, is that true?" he asked.

"Yes, it 's true," said Paul, with a glare of suspicion. He was not in the mood to

appreciate satire or banter; but the Captain appeared quite grave and his manner was courteous.

"It's beastly cold," Paul continued with a groan.

"In a moment you shall take a run," the Captain promised. And he pursued, "The Countess must not be in your debt. Permit me to discharge the obligation." He counted twenty of the thirty notes and held them out to Paul. After another stare Paul laughed feebly.

"I am doing our friend M. Guillaume no wrong," the Captain explained. "His employers have in their possession fifty thousand francs of mine. I avail myself of this opportunity to reduce the balance to their debit. As between M. Guillaume and me, that is all. As between you and me, sir, I act for the Countess. I pay your claim at your own figures, and since I discharge the claim I have made free to destroy the evidence. I have thrown the letters into the river. I do not wish to threaten, but if you 're not out of sight

in ten minutes, I 'll throw you after them."

"If I told you all the story—" began Paul with a sneer.

"I 'm not accustomed to listen to stories against ladies, sir," thundered the Captain.

"She 's had my money for a year—"

"The Countess would wish to be most liberal, but she did not understand that you regarded the transaction as a commercial one." He counted five more notes and handed them to Paul with an air of careless liberality.

Paul broke into a grudging laugh.

"What are you going to tell old Guillaume?" he asked.

"I 'm going to tell him that my claim against his employers is reduced by the amount that I have had the honour to hand you, M. de Roustache. Pardon me, but you seem to forget the remark I permitted myself to make just now." And the Captain pointed to the river.

Paul rose and stamped his feet on the

ground; he looked at his companion, and his surprise burst out in the question, "You really mean to let me go with five and twenty thousand francs?"

"I act as I am sure the lady whose name has been unavoidably mentioned would wish to act."

Paul stared again, then sniggered again, and pocketed his spoil.

"Only you must understand that—that the mine is worked out, my friend. I think your way lies there." He pointed towards the road that led up from the ford to Sasellano.

Still Paul lingered, seeming to wish to say something that he found difficult to phrase.

"I was devilish hard up," he muttered at last.

"That is always a temptation," said the Captain, gravely.

"A fellow does things that—that look queer. I say, would n't that odd five thousand come in handy for yourself?"

The Captain looked at him; almost he

refused the unexpected offer scornfully; but something in Paul's manner made him cry, quite suddenly, almost unconsciously, "Why, my dear fellow, if you put it that way—yes! As a loan from you to me, eh?"

"A loan? No—I—I—"

"Be at ease. Loan is the term we use between gentlemen—eh?" The Captain tried to curl his moist, uncurlable moustache.

And Paul de Roustache handed him back five thousand francs.

"My dear fellow!" murmured the Captain, as he stowed the notes in safety. He held out his hand; Paul de Roustache shook it and turned away. Dieppe stood watching him as he went, making not direct for the Sasellano road, but shaping a course straight up the hill, walking as though he hardly knew where he was going. So he passed out of the Captain's sight—and out of the list of the Countess of Fieramondi's creditors.

A little smile dwelt for a moment on Dieppe's face.

"I myself am very nearly a rascal sometimes," said he.

Crack! crack! The sound of a whip rang clear; the clatter of hoofs and the grind of a wheel on the skid followed. A carriage dashed down the hill from Sasellano. Paul de Roustache had seen it, and stooped low for a moment in instinctive fear of being seen. Captain Dieppe, on the other hand, cried "Bravo!" and began to walk briskly towards the ford. "How very lucky!" he reflected. "I will beg a passage; I have no fancy for another bath tonight."

CHAPTER VIII

THE CARRIAGE AT THE FORD

The direct issue between her Excellency and the innkeeper at Sasellano had ended as all such differences (save, of course, on points of morality) should —in a compromise. The lady would not resign herself to staying at Sasellano; the landlord would not engage to risk passenger, carriage, and horses in the flood. But he found and she accepted the services of a robust, stout-built fellow who engaged with the lady to drive her as far as the river and across it if possible, and promised the landlord to bring her and the equipage back in case the crossing were too dangerous. Neither party was pleased, but both consented, hoping to retrieve a temporary conces-

sion by ultimate victory. Moreover the lady paid the whole fare beforehand—not, the landlord precisely stipulated, to be returned in any event. So off her Excellency rattled in the wind and rain; and great was her triumph when the rain ceased, the wind fell, and the night cleared. She put her head out of the rackety old landau, whose dilapidated hood had formed a shelter by no means water-tight, and cried, "Who was right, driver?" But the driver turned his black cigar between his teeth, answering, "The mischief is done already. Well, we shall see!"

They covered eight miles in good time. They passed Paul de Roustache, who had no thought but to avoid them, and, once they were passed, took to the road and made off straight for Sasellano; they reached the descent and trotted gaily down it; they came within ten yards of the ford, and drew up sharply. The lady put her head out; the driver dismounted and took a look at the river.

Shaking his head, he came to the window.

"Your Excellency can't cross to-night," said he.

"I will," cried the lady, no less resolute now than she had been at the inn.

The direct issue again! And if the driver were as obstinate as he looked, the chances of that ultimate victory inclined to the innkeeper's side.

"The water would be inside the carriage," he urged.

"I 'll ride on the box by you," she rejoined.

"It 'll be up to the horses' shoulders."

"The horses don't mind getting wet, I suppose."

"They 'd be carried off their feet."

"Nonsense," said she, sharply, denying the fact since she could no longer pooh-pooh its significance. "Are you a coward?" she exclaimed indignantly.

"I 've got some sense in my head," said he with a grin.

At this moment Captain Dieppe, wish-

ing that he were dry, that he had a hat, that his moustache would curl, yet rising victorious over all disadvantages by virtue of his temperament and breeding, concealing also any personal interest that he had in the settlement of the question, approached the carriage, bowed to its occupant, and inquired, with the utmost courtesy, whether he could be of any service.

"It 's of great importance to me to cross," said she, returning his salutation.

"It 's impossible to cross," interposed the driver.

"Nonsense; I have crossed myself," remarked Captain Dieppe.

Both of them looked at him; he anticipated their questions or objections.

"Crossing on foot one naturally gets a little wet," said he, smiling.

"I won't let my horses cross," declared the driver. The Captain eyed him with a slightly threatening expression, but he did not like to quarrel before a lady.

"You 're afraid for your own skin," he

said contemptuously. "Stay this side. I'll bring the carriage back to you." He felt in his pocket and discovered two louis and two five-franc pieces. He handed the former coins to the driver. "I take all the responsibility to your master," he ended, and opening the carriage door he invited the lady to alight.

She was dark, tall, handsome, a woman of presence and of dignity. She took his hand and descended with much grace.

"I am greatly in your debt, sir," she said.

"Ladies, madame," he replied with a tentative advance of his hand toward his moustache, checked in time by a remembrance of the circumstances, "confer obligations often, but can contract none."

"I wish everybody thought as you do," said she with a deep sigh.

"Shall I mount the box?"

"If you please." He mounted after her, and took the reins. Cracking the whip, he urged on the horses.

"Body of the saints," cried the driver, stirred to emulation, "I 'll come with you!" and he leaped up on to the top of a travelling-trunk that was strapped behind the carriage.

"There is more good in human nature than one is apt to think," observed the Captain.

"If only one knows how to appeal to it," added the lady, sighing again very pathetically.

Somehow, the Captain received the idea that she was in trouble. He felt drawn to her, and not only by the sympathy which her courage and her apparent distress excited; he was conscious of some appeal, something in her which seemed to touch him directly and with a sort of familiarity, although he had certainly never seen her in his life before. He was pondering on this when one of the horses, frightened by the noise and rush of the water, reared up, while the other made a violent effort to turn itself, its comrade, and the carriage round, and

head back again for Sasellano. The Captain sprang up, shouted, plied the whip; the driver stood on the trunk and yelled yet more vigorously; her Excellency clutched the rail with her hand. And in they went.

"The peculiarity of this stream," began the Captain, "lies not so much in its depth as in—"

"The strength of the current," interposed his companion, nodding.

"You know it?" he cried.

"Very well," she answered, and she might have said more had not the horses at this moment chosen to follow the easiest route, and headed directly downstream. A shriek from the driver awoke Dieppe to the peril of the position. He plied his whip again, and did his best to turn the animals' heads towards the opposite bank. The driver showed his opinion of the situation by climbing on to the top of the landau.

This step was perhaps a natural, but it was not a wise one. The roof was not

adapted to carrying heavy weights. It gave way on one side, and in an instant the driver rolled over to the right and fell with a mighty splash into the water just above the carriage. At the same moment Dieppe contrived to turn the horses in the direction he aimed at, and the carriage moved a few paces.

"Ah, we move!" he exclaimed triumphantly.

"The driver 's fallen off!" cried the lady in alarm.

"I thought we seemed lighter, somehow," said Dieppe, paying no heed to the driver's terrified shouts, but still urging on his horses. He showed at this moment something of a soldier's recognition that, if necessary, life must be sacrificed for victory: he had taken the same view when he left M. Guillaume in order to pursue Paul de Roustache.

The driver, finding cries useless, saw that he must shift for himself. The wheel helped him to rise to his feet; he found he could stand. In a quick turn

of feeling, he called, "Courage!" Dieppe looked over at him with a rather contemptuous smile.

"What, have you found some down at the bottom of the river? Like truth in the well?" he asked. "Catch hold of one of the horses, then!" He turned to the lady. "You drive, madame?"

"Yes."

"Then do me the favour." He gave her the reins, with a gesture of apology stepped in front of her, and lowered himself into the water on the left-hand side. "Now, my friend, one of us at each of their heads, and we do it! The whip, madame with all your might, the whip!"

The horses made a bound; the driver dashed forward and caught one by the bridle; the lady lashed. On his side Dieppe, clinging to a trace, made his way forward. Both he and the driver now shouted furiously, their voices echoing in the hills that rose from the river on either side, and rising at last in a

shout of triumph as the wheels turned, the horses gained firm footing, and with a last spring forward landed the carriage in safety.

The driver swore softly and crossed himself devoutly before he fell to a rueful study of the roof of the landau.

"Monsieur, I am eternally indebted to you," cried the lady to Dieppe.

"It is a reciprocal service, madame," said he. "To tell the truth, I also had special reasons for wishing to gain this side of the river."

She appeared a trifle embarrassed, but civility, or rather gratitude, impelled her to the suggestion. "You are travelling my way?" she asked.

"A thousand thanks, but I have some business to transact first."

She seemed relieved, but she was puzzled, too. "Business? Here?" she murmured.

Dieppe nodded. "It will not keep me long," he added gravely.

The driver had succeeded in restoring

the top of the landau to a precarious stability. Dieppe handed the lady down from the box-seat and into the interior. The driver mounted his perch; the lady leant out of the window to take farewell of her ally.

"Every hour was of value to me," she said, with a plain touch of emotion in her voice, "and but for you I should have been taken back to Sasellano. We shall meet again, I hope."

"I shall live in the hope," said he, with a somewhat excessive gallantry—a trick of which he could not cure himself.

The driver whipped up—he did not intend that either he or his horses, having escaped drowning, should die of cold. The equipage lumbered up the hill, its inmate still leaning out and waving her hand. Dieppe watched until the party reached the zigzags and was hidden from view, though he still heard the crack of the whip.

"Very interesting, very interesting!" he murmured to himself. "But now to

business! Now for friend Guillaume and the Countess!" His face fell as he spoke. With the disappearance of excitement, and the cessation of exertion, he realised again the great sorrow that faced him and admitted of no evasion. He sighed deeply and sought his cigarette-case. Vain hope of comfort! His cigarettes were no more than a distasteful pulp. He felt forlorn, very cold, very hungry, also; for it was now between nine and ten o'clock. His heart was heavy as he prepared to mount the hill and finish his evening's work. He must see Guillaume; he must see the Countess; and then—

"Ah!" he cried, and stooped suddenly to the ground. A bright object lay plain and conspicuous on the road which had grown white again as it dried in the sharp wind. It was an oval locket of gold, dropped there, a few yards from the ford. It lay open—no doubt the jar of the fall accounted for that—face downwards. The Captain picked it up

and examined it. He said nothing; his usual habit of soliloquy failed him for the moment; he looked at it, then round at the landscape. For the moonlight showed him a picture in the locket, and enabled him to make out a written inscription under it.

"What?" breathed he at last. "Oh, I can't believe it!" He looked again. "Oh, if that 's the lie of the land, my friend!" He smiled; then, in an apparent revulsion of feeling, he frowned angrily, and even shook his fist downstream, perhaps intending the gesture for some one in the village. Lastly, he shook his head sadly, and set off up the hill in the wake of the now vanished carriage; as he went, he whistled in a soft and meditative way. But before he started, he had assured himself that he in his turn had not dropped anything, and that M. Guillaume's partially depleted portfolio was still safe in his pocket, side by side with his own precious papers. And he deposited the

locket he had found with these other valued possessions.

A few minutes' walking brought him to the Cross. The exercise had warmed him, the threatened stiffness of cold had passed; he ran lightly up the hill and down into the basin. There was no sign of M. Guillaume. The Captain, rather vexed, for he had business with that gentleman,—an explanation of a matter which touched his own honour to make, and an account which intimately concerned M. Guillaume to adjust,—entered the hut. In an instant his hand was grasped in an appealing grip, and the voice he loved best in the world (there was no blinking the fact, whatever might be thought of the propriety), cried, "Ah, you 're safe?"

"How touching that is!" thought the Captain. "She has a hundred causes for anxiety, but her first question is, 'You're safe?'" This was she whom he renounced, and this was she whom the Count of Fieramondi deceived. What were her trifling indiscretions beside her

husband's infamy—the infamy betrayed and proved by the picture and inscription in the locket?

"I am safe, and you are safe," said he, returning the pressure of her hand. "And where is our friend outside?"

"I don't know—I lay hidden till I heard him go. I don't know where he went. What do you mean by saying I 'm safe?"

"I have got rid of Paul de Roustache. He 'll trouble you no more."

"What?" Wonder and admiration sparkled in her eyes. Because he was enabled to see them, Dieppe was grateful to her for having replaced and relighted his candle. "Yes, I was afraid in the dark," she said, noticing his glance at it. "But it 's almost burnt out. We must be quick. Is the trouble with M. de Roustache really over?"

"Absolutely."

"And we owe it to you? But you—why, you 're wet!"

"It 's not surprising," said he, smiling.

"There 's a flood in the river, and I have crossed it twice."

"What did you cross the river for?"

"I had to escort M. de Roustache across, and he 's a bad swimmer. He jumped in, and—"

"You saved his life?"

"Don't reproach me, my friend. It is an instinct; and—er—he carried the pocket-book of our friend outside; and the pocket-book had my money in it, you know."

"Your money? I thought you had only fifty francs?"

"The money due to me, I should say. Fifty thousand francs." The Captain unconsciously assumed an air of some importance as he mentioned this sum. "So I was bound to pursue friend Paul," he ended.

"It was dangerous?"

"Oh, no, no," he murmured. "Coming back, though, was rather difficult," he continued. "The carriage was very heavy, and we had some ado to—"

"The carriage! What carriage?" she cried with eagerness.

"Oddly enough, I found a lady travelling—from Sasellano, I understood; and I had the privilege of aiding her to cross the ford." Dieppe spoke with a calculated lightness.

"A lady—a lady from Sasellano? What sort of a lady? What was she like?"

The Captain was watching her closely. Her agitation was unmistakable. Did she know, did she suspect, anything?

"She was tall, dark, and dignified in appearance. She spoke slowly, with a slight drawl—"

"Yes, yes!"

"And she was very eager to pursue her journey. She must have come by here. Did n't you hear the wheels?"

"No—I—I—was n't thinking." But she was thinking now. The next instant she cried, "I must go, I must go at once."

"But where?"

"Why, back home, of course! Where else should I go? Oh, I may be too late!"

Unquestionably she knew something—how much the Captain could not tell. His feelings may be imagined. His voice was low, and very compassionate as he asked:

"You'll go home? When she's there? At least, if I conclude rightly—"

"Yes, I must go. I must get there before she sees Andrea; otherwise, all will be lost."

For the instant her agitation seemed to make her forget Dieppe's presence, or what he might think of her manner. Now she recovered herself. "I mean—I mean—I want to speak to her. I must tell her—"

"Tell her nothing. Confront her with that." And the Captain produced the gold locket with an air of much solemnity.

His action did not miss its effect. She gazed at the locket in apparent bewilderment.

"No, don't open it," he added hastily.

"Where did you get it?"

"She dropped it by the river. It was open when I picked it up."

"Why, it 's the locket— How does it open?" She was busy looking for the spring.

"I implore you not to open it!" he cried, catching her hand and restraining her.

"Why?" she asked, pausing and looking up at him.

The question and the look that accompanied it proved too great a strain for Dieppe's self-control. Now he caught both her hands in his as he said:

"Because I can't bear that you should suffer. Because I love you too much."

Without a doubt it was delight that lit up her eyes now, but she whispered reprovingly, "Oh, you! You the ambassador."

"I had n't seen that locket when I became his ambassador."

"Let go my hands."

"Indeed I can't," urged the Captain. But she drew them away with a sharp motion that he could not resist, and before he could say or do more to stop her she had opened the locket.

"As I thought," she cried, hurriedly reclasping it and turning to him in eager excitement; "I must go, indeed I must go at once!"

"Alone?" asked Captain Dieppe, with a simple, but effective eloquence.

At least it appeared very effective. She came nearer to him and, of her own accord now, laid her hands in his. Shyness and pleasure struggled in her eyes as she fixed them on his face.

"I shall see you again," she murmured.

"How?" he asked.

"Why, you 're coming back—back to the Castle?" she cried eagerly. The doubt of his returning thither seemed to fill her with dismay.

The Captain's scruples gave way. Perhaps it was the locket that undermined them, perhaps that look in her

eyes, and the touch of her hands as they rested in his.

"I will do anything you bid me," he whispered.

"Then come once again." She paused. "Because I—I don't want to say good-bye just now."

"If I come, will it be to say good-bye?"

"That shall be as you wish," she said.

It seemed to Dieppe that no confession could have been more ample, yet none more delicately reserved in the manner of its utterance. His answer was to clasp her in his arms and kiss her lips. But in an instant he released her, in obedience to the faint, yet sufficient, protest of her hands pressing him away.

"Come in an hour," she whispered, and, turning, left him and passed from the hut.

For a moment or two he stood where he was, devoured by many conflicting feelings. But his love, once obedient to the dictates of friendship and the un-

yielding limits of honour, would not be denied now. How had the Count of Fieramondi now any right to invoke his honour, or to appeal to his friendship? Gladly, as a man will, the Captain seized on another's fault to excuse his own.

"I will go again—in an hour—and I will not say good-bye," he declared, as he flung himself down on one of the trusses of straw and prepared to wait till it should be time for him to set out.

The evening had been so full of surprises, so prolific of turns of fortune good and evil, so bountiful of emotions and changeful feelings, that he had little store of surprise left wherewith to meet any new revolution of the wheel. Nevertheless it was with something of a start that he raised his head again from the straw on which he had for a moment reclined, and listened intently. There had been a rustle in the straw; he turned his head sharply to the left. But he had misjudged the position whence the noise came. From behind the truss of straw to

his right there rose the figure of a man. Monsieur Guillaume stood beside him, his head tied round with a handkerchief, but his revolver in his hand. The Captain's hand flew towards his breast-pocket.

"You 'll particularly oblige me by not moving," said Monsieur Guillaume, with a smile.

Of a certainty a man should not mingle love and business, especially, perhaps, when neither the love nor the business can be said properly to belong to him.

CHAPTER IX

THE STRAW IN THE CORNER

There was nothing odd in M. Guillaume's presence, however little the lady or the Captain had suspected it. The surprise he gave was a reprisal for that which he had suffered when, after the Captain's exit, he had recovered his full faculties and heard a furtive movement within the hut. It was the inspiration and the work of a moment to raise himself with an exaggerated effort and a purposed noise, and to take his departure with a tread heavy enough to force itself on the ears of the unknown person inside. But he did not go far. To what purpose should he, since it was vain to hope to overtake the Captain or Paul de Roustache? Some one was left behind;

then, successful or unsuccessful, the Captain would return—unless Paul murdered him, a catastrophe which would be irremediable, but was exceedingly unlikely. Guillaume mounted to the top of the eminence and flung himself down in the grass; thence he crawled round the summit, descended again with a stealthiness in striking contrast to his obtrusive ascent, and lay down in the dark shadow of the hut itself. In about twenty minutes his patience was rewarded: the lady came out,—she had forgotten to mention this little excursion to the Captain,—mounted the rise, looked round, and walked down towards the Cross. Presumably she was looking for a sight of Dieppe. In a few minutes she returned. Guillaume was no longer lying by the hut, but was safe inside it under the straw. She found Dieppe's matches, relighted the candle, and sat down in the doorway with her back to the straw. Thus each had kept a silent vigil until the Captain returned to the rendezvous. Guillaume felt that

he had turned a rather unpromising situation to very good account. He was greatly and naturally angered with Paul de Roustache: the loss of his portfolio was grievous. But the Captain was his real quarry; the Captain's papers would more than console him for his money; and he had a very pretty plan for dealing with the Captain.

Nothing was to be gained by sitting upright. In a moment Dieppe realised this, and sank back on his truss of straw. He glanced at Guillaume's menacing weapon, and thence at Guillaume himself. "Your play, my friend," he seemed to say. He knew the game too well not to recognise and accept its chances. But Guillaume was silent.

"The hurt to your head is not serious or painful, I hope?" Dieppe inquired politely. Still Guillaume maintained a grim and ominous silence. The Captain tried again. "I trust, my dear friend," said he persuasively, "that your weapon is intended for strictly defensive pur-

poses?" The candle had burnt almost down to the block on which it rested (the fact did not escape Dieppe), but it served to show Guillaume's acid smile. "What quarrel have we?" pursued the Captain, in a conciliatory tone. "I 've actually been engaged on your business, and got confoundedly wet over it too."

"You 've been across the river then?" asked Guillaume, breaking his silence.

"It 's not my fault—the river was in my way," Dieppe answered a little impatiently. "As for you, why do you listen to my conversation?"

"With the Countess of Fieramondi? Ah, you soldiers! You were a little indiscreet there, my good Captain. But that 's not my business."

"Your remark is very just," agreed Dieppe. "I 'll give that candle just a quarter of an hour," he was thinking.

"Except so far as I may be able to turn it to my purposes. Come, we know one another, Captain Dieppe."

"We have certainly met in the course

of business," the Captain conceded with a touch of hauteur, as he shifted the truss a little further under his right shoulder.

"I want something that you have," said Guillaume, fixing his eyes on his companion. Dieppe's were on the candle. "Listen to me," commanded Guillaume, imperiously.

"I have really no alternative," shrugged the Captain. "But don't make impossible propositions. And be brief. It 's late; I 'm hungry, cold, and wet."

Guillaume smiled contemptuously at this useless bravado; for such it seemed to him. It did not occur to his mind that Dieppe had anything to gain—or even a bare chance of gaining anything—by protracting the conversation. But in fact the Captain was making observations—first of the candle, secondly of the number and position of the trusses of straw.

"Are you in a position to call any proposition impossible?" Guillaume asked.

"It 's quite true that I can't make use of my revolver," agreed the Captain. "But on the other hand you don't, I presume, intend to murder me? Would n't that be exceeding your instructions?"

"I don't know as to that—I might be forgiven. But of course I entertain no such desire. Captain, I 've an idea that you 're in possession of my portfolio."

"What puts that into your head?" inquired the Captain in a rather satirical tone.

"From what you said to the Countess I—"

"Ah, I find it so hard to realise that you actually committed that breach of etiquette," murmured Dieppe, reproachfully.

"And that perhaps—I say only perhaps—you have made free with the contents. For it seems you 've got rid of Paul de Roustache. Well, I will not complain—"

"Ah?" said the Captain with a movement of interest.

"But if I lose my money, I must have my money's worth."

"That 's certainly what one prefers when it 's possible," smiled the Captain, indulgently.

"To put it briefly—"

"As briefly as you can, pray," cried Dieppe; but the candle burnt steadily still, and brevity was the last thing that he desired.

"Give me your papers and you may keep the porttolio."

The Captain's indignation at this proposal was extreme; indeed, it led him to sit upright again, to fix his eyes on the candle, and to talk right on end for hard on five minutes—in fact as long as he could find words—on the subject of his honour as a gentleman, as a soldier, as a Frenchman, as a friend, as a confidential agent, and as a loyal servant. Guillaume did not interrupt him, but listened with a smile of genuine amusement.

"Excellent!" he observed, as the Captain sank back exhausted. "A most ex-

cellent preamble for your explanation of the loss, my dear Captain. And you will add at the end that, seeing all this, it cannot be doubted that you surrendered these papers only under absolute compulsion, and not the least in the world for reasons connected with my portfolio."

"My words were meant to appeal to your own better feelings," sighed the Captain in a tone of despairing reproach.

"You betray the Count of Fieramondi, your friend; why not betray your employers also?"

For a moment there was a look in the Captain's eye which seemed to indicate annoyance, but the next instant he smiled.

"As if there were any parallel!" said he. "Matters of love are absolutely different, my good friend." Then he went on very carelessly, "The candle 's low. Why don't you light your lantern?"

"That rascal Paul threw it away, and I had n't time to get it." No expression, save a mild concern, appeared on Captain Dieppe's face, although he had discovered

a fact of peculiar interest to him. "The candle will last as long as we shall want it," pursued Guillaume.

"Very probably," agreed the Captain, with a languid yawn; again he shifted his straw till the bulk of it was under his right shoulder, and he lay on an incline that sloped down to the left. "And you 'll kill me and take my papers, eh?" he inquired, turning and looking up at Guillaume. He could barely see his enemy's face now, for the candle guttered and sputtered, while the moon, high in heaven, threw light on the dip of the hill outside, but did little or nothing to relieve the darkness within the hut.

"No, I shall not murder you. You 'll give them to me, I 'm sure."

"And if I refuse, dear M. Guillaume?"

"I shall invite you to accompany me to the village—or, more strictly, to precede me."

"What should we do together in the village?" cried Dieppe.

"I shall beg of you to walk a few paces in front of me,—just a few,—to go at just the pace I go, and to remember that I carry a revolver in my hand."

"My memory would be excellent on such a point," the Captain assured him. "But, again, why to the village?"

"We should go together to the office of the police. I am on good terms with the police."

"Doubtless. But what have they to do with me? Come, come, my matter is purely political; they would n't mix themselves up in it."

"I should charge you with the unlawful possession of my portfolio. You would admit it, or you would deny it. In either case your person would be searched, the papers would be found, and I, who am on such friendly terms with the police, should certainly enjoy an excellent opportunity of inspecting them. You perceive, my dear Captain, that I have thought it out."

"It 's neat, certainly," agreed the Cap-

tain, who was not a little dismayed at this plan of Guillaume's. "But I should not submit to the search."

"Ah! Now how would you prevent it?"

"I should send for my friend the Count. He has influence; he would answer for me."

"What, when he hears my account of your interview with his wife?" Old Guillaume played this card with a smile of triumph. "I told you that the little affair might perhaps be turned to my purposes," he reminded Dieppe, maliciously.

The Captain reflected, taking as long as he decently could over the task. Indeed he was in trouble. Guillaume's scheme was sagacious, Guillaume's position very strong. And at last Guillaume grew impatient. But still the persistent candle burnt.

"I give you one minute to make up your mind," said Guillaume, dropping his tone of sarcastic pleasantry, and speak-

ing in a hard, sharp voice. "After that, either you give me the papers, or you get up and march before me to the village."

"If I refuse to do either?"

"You can't refuse," said Guillaume.

"You mean—?"

"I should order you to hold your hands behind your back while I took the papers. If you moved—"

"Thank you. I see," said the Captain, with a nod of understanding. "Awkward for you, though, if it came to that."

"Oh, I think not very, in view of your dealings with my portfolio."

"I 'm in a devil of a hole," admitted the Captain, candidly.

"Time 's up," announced M. Guillaume, slowly raising the barrel of his revolver, and taking aim at the Captain. For the candle still burnt, although dimly and fitfully, and still there was light to guide the bullet on its way.

"It 's all up!" said the Captain. "But, deuce take it, it 's hardly the way to treat

a gentleman!" Even as he spoke the light of the candle towered for a second in a last shoot of flame, and then went out.

At the same moment the Captain rolled down the incline of straw on which he had been resting, rose on his knees an instant, seized the truss and flung it at Guillaume, rolled under the next truss, seized that in like manner and propelled it against the enemy, and darted again to shelter. "Stop, or I fire," cried Guillaume; he was as good as his word the next minute, but the third truss caught him just as he aimed, and his bullet flew against and was buried in the planking of the roof. By now, the Captain was escaping from under the fourth truss, and making for the fifth. Guillaume, dimly seeing the fourth truss not thrown, but left in its place, discharged another shot at it. The fifth truss caught him in the side and drove him against the wooden block. He turned swiftly in the direction whence the missile came,

and fired again. He was half dazed, his eyes and ears seemed full of the dust of the straw. He fired once again at random, swearing savagely; and before he could recover aim his arm was seized from behind, his neck was caught in a vigorous garotte, and he fell on the floor of the hut with Captain Dieppe on the top of him—Dieppe, dusty, dirty, panting, bleeding freely from a bullet graze on the top of the left ear, and with one leg of his trousers slit from ankle to knee by a rusty nail, that had also ploughed a nasty furrow up his leg. But now he seized Guillaume's revolver, and dragged the old fellow out of the hut. Then he sat down on his chest, pinning his arms together on the ground above his head.

"You enjoyed playing your mouse just a trifle too long, old cat," said he.

Guillaume lay very still, exhausted, beaten, and defenceless. Dieppe released his hands, and, rising, stood looking down at him. A smile came on his face.

"We are now in a better position to

adjust our accounts fairly," he observed, as he took from his pocket M. Guillaume's portfolio. "Listen," he commanded; and Guillaume turned weary but spiteful eyes to him. "Here is your portfolio. Take it. Look at it."

Guillaume sat up and obeyed the command.

"Well?" asked Dieppe, when the examination was ended.

"You have robbed me of twenty-five thousand francs."

The Captain looked at him for a moment with a frown. But the next instant he smiled.

"I must make allowances for the state of your temper," he remarked. "But I wish you would carry all your money in notes. That draft, now, is no use to me. Hence"—he shrugged his shoulders regretfully—"I am obliged to leave your Government still no less than twenty-five thousand francs in debt to me."

"What?" cried Guillaume, with a savage stare.

"Oh, yes, you know that well. They have fifty thousand which certainly don't belong to them, and certainly do to me."

"That money 's forfeited," growled Guillaume.

"If you like, then, I forfeit twenty-five thousand of theirs. But I allow it in account with them. The debt now stands reduced by half."

"I 'll get it back from you somehow," threatened Guillaume, who was helpless, but not cowed.

"That will be difficult. I gave it to Paul de Roustache to discharge a claim he had on me."

"To Paul de Roustache?"

"Yes. It 's true he lent me five thousand again; but that 's purely between him and me. And I shall have spent it long before you can even begin to take steps to recover it." He paused a moment and then added, "If you still hanker after your notes, I should recommend you to find your friend and accomplice, M. Paul."

"Where is he?"

"Who can tell? I saw him last on the road across the river—it leads to Sasellano, I believe." Dieppe kept his eye on his vanquished opponent, but Guillaume threatened no movement. The Captain dropped the revolver into his pocket, stooped to pull up a tuft of grass with moist earth adhering to it, and, with the help of his handkerchief, made a primitive plaster to stanch the bleeding of his ear. As he was so engaged, the sound of wheels slowly climbing the hill became audible from the direction of the village.

"You see," he went on, "you can't return to the village—you are on too good terms with the police. Let me advise you to go to Sasellano; the flood will be falling by now, and I should n't wonder if we could find you a means of conveyance." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the road behind him.

"I can't go back to the village?" demanded Guillaume, sullenly.

"In my turn I must beg you to remember that I now carry a revolver. Come, M. Guillaume, we 've played a close hand, but the odd trick 's mine. Go back and tell your employers not to waste their time on me. No, nor their money. They have won the big stake; let them be content. And again let me remind you that Paul de Roustache has your twenty thousand francs. I don't think you 'll get them from him, but you might. From me you 'll get nothing; and if you try the law—oh, think, my friend, how very silly you and your Government will look!"

As he spoke he went up to Guillaume and took him by the arm, exerting a friendly and persuasive pressure, under which Guillaume presently found himself mounting the eminence. The wheels sounded nearer now, and Dieppe's ears were awake to their movements. The pair began to walk down the other side of the slope towards the Cross, and the carriage came into their view. It was

easy of identification: its broken-down, lopsided top marked it beyond mistake.

An instant later Dieppe recognised the burly figure of the driver, who was walking by his horses' heads.

"Wonderfully convenient!" he exclaimed. "This fellow will carry you to Sasellano without delay."

Guillaume did not—indeed could not—refuse to obey the prompting of the Captain's arm, but he grumbled as he went.

"I made sure of getting your papers," he said.

"Unlooked-for difficulties will arise, my dear M. Guillaume."

"I thought the reward was as good as in my pocket."

"The reward?" The Captain stopped and looked in his companion's face with some amusement and a decided air of gratification. "There was a reward? Oh, I am important, it seems!"

"Five thousand francs," said Guillaume, sullenly.

"They rate me rather cheap," exclaimed

the Captain, his face falling. "I should have hoped for five-and-twenty."

"Would you? If it had been that, I should have brought three men with me."

"Hum!" said the Captain. "And you gave me a stiff job by yourself, eh?" He turned and signalled to the driver, who had now reached the Cross: "Wait a moment there, my friend." Then he turned back again to Guillaume. "Get into the carriage—go to Sasellano; catch Paul if you can, but leave me in peace," he said, and, diving into his pocket, he produced the five notes of a thousand francs which Paul de Roustache, in some strange impulse of repentance, or gratitude, had handed to him. "What you tell your employers," he added, "I don't care. This is a gift from me to you. The deuce, I reward effort as well as success—I am more liberal than your Government." The gesture with which he held out the notes was magnificent.

Guillaume stared at him in amazement, but his hand went out towards the notes.

"I am free to do what I can at Saselllano?"

"Yes, free to do anything except bother me. But I think your bird will have flown."

Guillaume took the notes and hid them in his pocket; then he walked straight up to the driver, crying, "How much to take me with you to Sasellano?"

The driver looked at him, at Dieppe, and then down towards the river.

"Come, the flood will be less by now; the river will be falling," said Dieppe.

"Fifty francs," said the driver, and Guillaume got in.

"Good!" said the Captain to himself. "A pretty device! And that scoundrel's money did n't lie comfortably in the pocket of a gentleman." He waved his hand to Guillaume and was about to turn away, when the driver came up to him and spoke in a cautious whisper, first looking over his shoulder to see whether

his new fare were listening; but Guillaume was sucking at a flask.

"I have a message for you," he said.

"From the lady you carried— ?"

"To the Count of Fieramondi's."

"Ah, you took her there?" The Captain frowned heavily.

"Yes, and left her there. But it 's not from her; it 's from another lady whom I had n't seen before. She met me just as I was returning from the Count's, and bade me look out for you by the Cross—"

"Yes, yes?" cried Dieppe, eagerly. "Give me the message." For his thoughts flew back to the Countess at the first summons.

The driver produced a scrap of paper, carelessly folded, and gave it to him.

Dieppe ran to the carriage and read the message by the light of its dim and smoky lamp:

"I think I am in time. Come; I wait for you. Whatever you see, keep Andrea in the dark. If you are discreet, all will be well, and I—I shall be very grateful."

The driver mounted the box, the carriage rolled off down the hill, Dieppe was left by the Cross, with the message in his hand. He did not understand the situation.

CHAPTER X

THE JOURNEY TO ROME

It was about ten o'clock—or, it may be, nearer half-past ten—the same night when two inhabitants of the village received very genuine, yet far from unpleasant, shocks of surprise.

The first was the parish priest. He was returning from a visit to the bedside of a sick peasant and making his way along the straggling street towards his own modest dwelling, which stood near the inn, when he met a tall stranger of most dilapidated appearance, whose clothes were creased and dirty, and whose head was encircled by a stained and grimy handkerchief. He wore no hat; his face was disfigured with blotches of an ugly colour and, maybe, an uglier

significance; his trousers were most atrociously rent and tattered; he walked with a limp, and shivered in the cold night air. This unpromising-looking person approached the priest and addressed him with an elaborate courtesy oddly out of keeping with his scarecrow-like appearance, but with words appropriate enough to the figure that he cut.

"Reverend father," said he, "pardon the liberty I take, but may I beg of your Reverence's great kindness—"

"It 's no use begging of me," interrupted the priest hurriedly, for he was rather alarmed. "In the first place, I have nothing; in the second, mendicancy is forbidden by the regulations of the commune."

The wayfarer stared at the priest, looked down at his own apparel, and then burst into a laugh.

"Begging forbidden, eh?" he exclaimed. "Then the poor must need voluntary aid!" He thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out two

French five-franc pieces. "For the poor, father," he said, pressing them into the priest's hand. "For myself, I was merely about to ask you the time of night." And before the astonished priest could make any movement the stranger passed on his way, humming a soft, and sentimental tune.

"He was certainly mad, but he undoubtedly gave me ten francs," said the priest to his friend the innkeeper, the next day.

"I wish," growled the innkeeper, "that somebody would give me some money to pay for what those two runaway rogues who lodged here had of me; their baggage is worth no more than half what they 've cost me, and I 'll lay odds I never clap eyes on them again."

And in this suspicion the innkeeper proved, in the issue, to be absolutely right; about the value of the luggage there is, however, more room for doubt.

The second person who suffered a surprise was no less a man than the Count

of Fieramondi himself. But how this came about needs a little more explanation.

In that very room through whose doorway Captain Dieppe had first beheld the lady whom he now worshipped with a devotion as ardent as it was unhappy, there were now two ladies engaged in conversation. One sat in an arm-chair, nursing the yellow cat of which mention has been made earlier in this history; the other walked up and down with every appearance of weariness, trouble, and distress on her handsome face.

"Oh, the Bishop was just as bad as the banker," she cried fretfully, "and the banker was just as silly as the Bishop. The Bishop said that, although he might have considered the question of giving me absolution from a vow which I had been practically compelled to take, he could hold out no prospect of my getting it beforehand for taking a vow which I took with no other intention than that of breaking it."

"I told you he 'd say that before you went," observed the lady in the arm-chair, who seemed to be treating the situation with a coolness in strong contrast to her companion's agitation.

"And the banker said that although, if I had actually spent fifty thousand lire more than I possessed, he would have done his best to see how he could extricate me from the trouble, he certainly would not help me to get fifty thousand for the express purpose of throwing them away."

"I thought the banker would say that," remarked the other lady, caressing the cat.

"And they both advised me to take my husband's opinion on the matter. My husband's opinion!" Her tone was bitter and tragic indeed. "I suppose they 're right," she said, flinging herself dejectedly into a chair. "I must tell Andrea everything. Oh, and he 'll forgive me!"

"Well, I should think it 's rather nice being forgiven."

"Oh, no, not by Andrea!" The faintest smile flitted for an instant across her face. "Oh, no, Andrea does n't forgive like that. His forgiveness is very—well, horribly biblical, you know. Oh, I 'd better not have gone to Rome at all!"

"I never saw any good in your going to Rome, you know."

"Yes, I must tell him everything. Because Paul de Roustache is sure to come and—"

"He 's come already," observed the second lady, calmly.

"What? Come?"

The other lady set down the cat, rose to her feet, took out of her pocket a gold ring and a gold locket, walked over to her companion, and held them out to her. "These are yours, are n't they?" she inquired, and broke into a merry laugh. The sight brought nothing but an astonished stare and a breathless ejaculation—

"Lucia!"

The two ladies drew their chairs close together, and a long conversation ensued,

Lucia being the chief narrator, while her companion, whom she addressed from time to time as Emilia, did little more than listen and throw in exclamations of wonder, surprise, or delight.

"How splendidly you kept the secret!" she cried once. And again, "How lucky that he should be here!" And again, "I thought he looked quite charming." And once again, "But, goodness, what a state the poor man must be in! How could you help telling him, Lucia?"

"I had promised," said Lucia, solemnly, "and I keep my promises, Emilia."

"And that man has positively gone?" sighed Emilia, taking no notice of a rather challenging emphasis which Lucia had laid on her last remark.

"Yes, gone for good—I 'm sure of it. And you need n't tell Andrea anything. Just take all the vows he asks you to! But he won't now; you see he wants a reconciliation as much as you do."

"I shall insist on taking at least one vow," said Emilia, with a virtuous air.

She stopped and started. "But what in the world am I to say about you, my dear?" she asked.

"Say I 've just come back from Rome, of course," responded Lucia.

"If he should find out—"

"It 's very unlikely, and at the worst you must take another vow, Emilia. But Andrea 'll never suspect the truth unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless Captain Dieppe lets it out, you know."

"It would be better if Captain Dieppe did n't come back, I think," observed Emilia, thoughtfully.

"Well, of all the ungrateful women!" cried Lucia, indignantly. But Emilia sprang up and kissed her, and began pressing her with all sorts of questions, or rather with all sorts of ways of putting one question, which made her blush very much, and to which she seemed unable, or unwilling, to give any definite reply. At last Emilia abandoned the

attempt to extract an admission, and observed with a sigh of satisfaction:

"I think I 'd better see Andrea and forgive him."

"You 'll change your frock first, won't you, dear?" cried Lucia. It was certainly not desirable that Emilia should present herself to the Count in the garments she was then wearing.

"Yes, of course. Will you come with me to Andrea?"

"No. Send for me, presently—as soon as it occurs to you that I 've just come back from Rome, you know, and should be so happy to hear of your reconciliation."

Half an hour later,—for the change of costume had to be radical, since there is all the difference in the world between a travelling-dress and an easy, negligent, yet elegant, toilette suggestive of home and the fireside, and certainly not of wanderings,—the Count of Fieramondi got his shock of surprise in the shape of an inquiry whether he were at leisure to receive a visit from the Countess.

Yet his surprise, great as it was at a result at once so prosperous and so speedy, did not prevent him from drawing the obvious inference. His thoughts had already been occupied with Captain Dieppe. It was now half-past ten; he had waited an hour for dinner, and then eaten it alone in some disquietude; as time went on he became seriously uneasy, and had considered the despatch of a search expedition. If his friend did not return in half an hour, he had declared, he himself would go and look for him; and he had requested that he should be informed the moment the Captain put in an appearance. But, alas! what is friendship—even friendship reinforced by gratitude—beside love? As the poets have often remarked, in language not here to be attained, its power is insignificant, and its claims go to the wall. On fire with the emotions excited by the Countess's message, the Count forgot both Dieppe and all that he owed to Dieppe's intercession; the matter went

clean out of his head for the moment. He leapt up, pushed away the poem on which he had been trying to concentrate his mind, and cried eagerly:

"I 'm at the Countess's disposal. I 'll wait on her at once."

"The Countess is already on her way here," was the servant's answer.

The first transports of joy are perhaps better left in a sacred privacy. Indeed the Count was not for much explanation, or for many words. What need was there? The Countess acquiesced in his view with remarkable alacrity; the fewer words there were, and especially, perhaps, the fewer explanations, the easier and more gracious was her part. She had thought the matter over, there in the solitude to which her Andrea's cruelty had condemned her: and, yes, she would take the oath—in fact any number of oaths—to hold no further communication whatever with Paul de Roustache.

"Ah, your very offer is a reproach to me," said the Count, softly. "I told you

that now I ask no oath, that your promise was enough, that—"

"You told me?" exclaimed the Countess, with some appearance of surprise.

"Why, yes. At least I begged Dieppe to tell you in my name. Did n't he?"

For a moment the Countess paused, engaged in rapid calculations, then she said sweetly:

"Oh, yes, of course! But it 's not the same as hearing it from your own lips, Andrea."

"Where did you see him?" asked the Count. "Did he pass the barricade? Ah, we 'll soon have that down, won't we?"

"Oh, yes, Andrea; do let 's have it down, because—"

"But where did you and Dieppe have your talk?"

"Oh—oh—down by the river, Andrea."

"He found you there?"

"Yes, he found me there, and—and talked to me."

"And gave you back the ring?" inquired the Count, tenderly.

The Countess took it from her pocket and handed it to her husband. "I 'd rather you 'd put it on yourself," she said.

The Count took her hand in his and placed the ring on her finger. It fitted very well, indeed. There could be no doubt that it was made for the hand on which it now rested. The Count kissed it as he set it there.

At last, however, he found time to remember the obligations he was under to his friend.

"But where can our dear Dieppe be?" he cried. "We owe so much to him."

"Yes, we do owe a lot to him," murmured the Countess. "But, Andrea—"

"Indeed, my darling, we must n't forget him. I must—"

"No, we must n't forget him. Oh, no, we won't. But, Andrea, I—I 've got another piece of news for you." The Countess spoke with a little timidity, as if she were trying delicate ground, and were not quite sure of her footing.

"More news? What an eventful night!"

He took his wife's hand. Away went all thoughts of poor Dieppe again.

"Yes, it 's so lucky, happening just to-night. Lucia has come back! An hour ago!"

"Lucia come back!" exclaimed the Count, gladly. "That's good news, indeed."

"It 'll delight her so much to find us —to find us like this again, Andrea."

"Yes, yes, we must send for her. Is she in her room? And where has she come from?"

"Rome," answered the Countess, again in a rather nervous way.

"Rome!" cried the Count in surprise. "What took her to Rome?"

"She does n't like to be asked much about it," began the Countess, with a prudent air.

"I 'm sure I don't want to pry into her affairs, but—"

"No, I knew you would n't want to do that, Andrea."

"Still, my dear, it 's really a little odd. She left only four days ago. Now she 's back, and—"

The Count broke off, looking rather distressed. Such proceedings, accompanied by such mystery, were not, to his mind, quite the proper thing for a young and unmarried lady.

"I won't ask her any questions," he went on, "but I suppose she 's told you, Emilia?"

"Oh, yes, she 's told me," said the Countess, hastily.

"And am I to be excluded from your confidence?"

The Countess put her arms round his neck.

"Well, you know, Andrea," said she, "you do sometimes scoff at religion—well, I mean you talk rather lightly sometimes, you know."

"Oh, she went on a religious errand, did she?"

"Yes," the Countess answered in a more confident tone. "She particularly

wanted to consult the Bishop of Mesopotamia. She believes in him very much. Oh, so do I. I do believe, Andrea, that if you knew the Bishop of—"

"My dear, I don't want to know the Bishop of Mesopotamia; but Lucia is perfectly at liberty to consult him as much as she pleases. I don't see any need for mystery."

"No, neither do I," murmured the Countess. "But dear Lucia is—is so sensitive, you know."

"I remember seeing him about Rome very well. I must ask Lucia whether he still wears that—"

"Really, the less you question Lucia about her journey the better, dear Andrea," said the Countess, in a tone which was very affectionate, but also marked by much decision. And there can be no doubt she spoke the truth, from her own point of view, at least. "Would n't it be kind to send for her now?" she added. In fact the Countess found this interview, so gratifying and

delightful in its main aspect, rather difficult in certain minor ways, and Lucia would be a convenient ally. It was much better, too, that they should talk about one another in one another's presence. That is always more straightforward; and, in this case, it would minimise the chances of a misunderstanding in the future. For instance, if Lucia showed ignorance about the Bishop of Mesopotamia—! "Do let 's send for Lucia," the Countess said again, coaxingly; and the Count, after a playful show of unwillingness to end their tête-à-tête, at last consented.

But here was another difficulty—Lucia could not be found. The right wing was searched without result; she was nowhere. On the chance, unlikely indeed but possible, that she had taken advantage of the new state of things, they searched the left wing too—with an equal absence of result. Lucia was nowhere in the house; so it was reported. The Count was very much surprised.

"Can she have gone out at this time of night?" he cried.

The Countess was not much surprised. She well understood how Lucia might have gone out a little way—far enough, say, to look for Captain Dieppe, and make him aware of how matters stood. But she did not suggest this explanation to her husband; explanations are to be avoided when they themselves require too much explaining.

"It 's very fine now," said she, looking out of the window. "Perhaps she 's just gone for a turn on the road."

"What for?" asked the Count, spreading out his hands in some bewilderment.

The Countess, in an extremity, once more invoked the aid of the Bishop of Mesopotamia.

"Perhaps, dear," she said gently, "to think it over—to reflect in quiet on what she has learnt and been advised." And she added, as an artistic touch, "To think it over under the stars, dear Andrea."

The Count, betraying a trifle of impatience, turned to the servant.

"Run down the road," he commanded, "and see if the Countess Lucia is anywhere about." He returned to his wife's side. "One good thing about it is that we can have our talk out," said he.

"Yes, but let 's leave the horrid past and talk about the future," urged the Countess, with affection—and no doubt with wisdom also.

The servant, who in obedience to the Count's order ran down the road towards the village, did not see the Countess Lucia. That lady, mistrusting the explicitness of her hurried note, had stolen out into the garden, and was now standing hidden in the shadow of the barricade, straining her eyes down the hill towards the river and the stepping-stones. There lay the shortest way for the Captain to return—and of course, she had reasoned, he would come the shortest way. She did not, however, allow for the Captain's pardonable reluctance to get wet a third

time that night. He did not know the habits of the river, and he distrusted the stepping-stones. After his experience he was all for a bridge. Moreover he did not hurry back to the Castle; he had much to think over, and no inviting prospect lured him home on the wings of hope. What hope was there? What hope of happiness either for himself or for the lady whom he loved? If he yielded to his love, he wronged her—her and his own honour. If he resisted, he must renounce her—aye, and leave her, not to a loving husband, but to one who deceived her most grossly and most cruelly, in a way which made her own venial errors seem as nothing in the Captain's partial, pitying eyes. In the distress of these thoughts he forgot his victories: how he had disposed of Paul de Roustache, how he had defeated M. Guillaume, how his precious papers were safe, and even how the Countess was freed from all her fears. It was her misery he thought of now, not her fears.

For she loved him. And in his inmost heart he knew that he must leave her.

Yes; in the recesses of his heart he knew what true love for her and a true regard for his own honour alike demanded. But he did not mean that, because he saw this and was resolved to act on it, the Count should escape castigation. Before he went, before he left behind him what was dearest in life, and again took his way alone, unfriended, solitary (penniless too, if he had happened to remember this), he would speak his mind to the Count, first in stinging reproaches, later in the appeal that friendship may make to honour; and at the last he would demand from the Count, as the recompense for his own services, an utter renunciation and abandonment of the lady who had dropped the locket by the ford, of her whom the driver had carried to the door of the house which the Countess of Fieramondi honoured with her gracious presence. In drawing a contrast between the Countess and this

shameless woman the last remembrance of the Countess's peccadilloes faded from his indignant mind. He quickened his pace a little, as a man does when he has reached a final decision. He crossed the bridge, ascended the hill on which the Castle stood, and came opposite to the little gate which the Count himself had opened to him on that first happy—or unhappy—night on which he had become an inmate of the house.

Even as he came to it, it opened, and the Count's servant ran out. In a moment he saw Dieppe and called to him loudly and gladly.

"Sir, sir, my master is most anxious about you. He feared for your safety."

"I 'm safe enough," answered Dieppe, in a gloomy tone.

"He begs your immediate presence, sir. He is in the dining-room."

Dieppe braced himself to the task before him.

"I will follow you," he said; and passing the gate he allowed the servant to precede him into the house. "Now for what I must say!" he thought, as he was conducted towards the dining-room.

The servant had been ordered to let the Count know the moment that Captain Dieppe returned. How obey these orders more to the letter than by ushering the Captain himself directly into the Count's presence? He threw open the door, announcing—

"Captain Dieppe!" and then withdrawing with dexterous quickness.

Captain Dieppe had expected nothing good. The reality was worse than his imagining The Count sat on a sofa, and by him, with her arms round his neck, was the lady whom Dieppe had escorted across the ford on the road from Sasellano. The Captain stood still just within the doorway, frowning heavily. Sadly he remembered the Countess's

letter. Alas, it was plain enough that she had not come in time!

Just at this moment the servant, having seen nothing of Countess Lucia on the road, decided, as a last resort, to search the garden for her Ladyship.

CHAPTER XI

THE LUCK OF THE CAPTAIN

It is easy to say that the Captain should not have been so shocked, and that it would have been becoming in him to remember his own transgression committed in the little hut in the hollow of the hill. But human nature is not, as a rule at least, so constituted that the immediate or chief effect of the sight of another's wrong-doing is to recall our own. The scene before him outraged all the Captain's ideas of how his neighbours ought to conduct themselves, and (perhaps a more serious thing) swept away all memory of the caution contained in the Countess's letter.

The Count rose with a smile, still holding the Countess by the hand.

"My dear friend," he cried, "we 're delighted to see you. But what? You 've been in the wars!"

Dieppe made no answer. His stare attracted his host's attention.

"Ah," he pursued, with a laugh, "you wonder to see us like this? We are treating you too much *en famille!* But indeed you ought to be glad to see it. We owe it almost all to you. No, she would n't be here but for you, my friend. Would you, dear?"

"No, I—I don't suppose I should."

Did they refer to Dieppe's assisting her across the ford? If he had but known—

"Come," urged the Count, "give me your hand, and let my wife and me—"

"What?" cried the Captain, loudly, in unmistakable surprise.

The Count looked from him to the Countess. The Countess began to laugh. Her husband seemed as bewildered as Dieppe.

"Oh, dear," laughed the Countess, "I

believe Captain Dieppe did n't know me!"

"Did n't know you?"

"He 's only seen me once, and then in the dark, you know. Oh, what did you suspect? But you recognise me now? You will believe that I really am Andrea's wife?"

The Captain could not catch the cue. It meant to him so complete a reversal of what he had so unhesitatingly believed, such an utter upsetting of all his notions. For if this were in truth the Countess of Fieramondi, why, who was the other lady? His want of quickness threatened at last to ruin the scheme which he had, although unconsciously, done so much to help; for the Count was growing puzzled.

"I—I— Of course I know the Countess of Fieramondi," stammered Dieppe.

The Countess held out her hand gracefully. There could, at least, be little harm in kissing it. Dieppe walked across the room and paid his homage.

As he rose from this social observance he heard a voice from the doorway saying:

"Are n't you glad to see me, Andrea?"

The Captain shot round in time to see the Count paying the courtesy which he had himself just paid—and paying it to a lady whom he did know very well. The next instant the Count turned to him, saying:

"Captain, let me present you to my wife's cousin, the Countess Lucia Bonavia d'Orano. She has arrived to-night from Rome. How did you leave the Bishop of Mesopotamia, Lucia?"

But the Countess interposed very quickly.

"Now, Andrea, you promised me not to bother Lucia about her journey, and especially not about the Bishop. You don't want to talk about it, do you, Lucia?"

"Not at all," said Lucia, and the Count laughed rather mockingly. "And you need n't introduce me to Captain Dieppe,

either," she went on. "We 've met before."

"Met before?" The Count turned to Dieppe. "Why, where was that?"

"At the ford over the river." It was Lucia now who interposed. "He helped me across. Oh, I 'll tell you all about it."

She began her narrative, which she related with particular fulness. For a while Dieppe watched her. Then he happened to glance towards the Countess. He found that lady's eyes set on him with an intentness full of meaning. The Count's attention was engrossed by Lucia. Emilia gave a slight but emphatic nod. A slow smile dawned on Captain Dieppe's face.

"Indeed," ended Lucia, "I 'm not at all sure that I don't owe my life to Captain Dieppe." And she bestowed on the Captain a very kindly glance. The Count turned to speak to his wife. Lucia nodded sharply at the Captain.

"You were — er — returning from Rome?" he asked.

"From visiting the Bishop of Mesopotamia," called the Countess.

"Yes," said Lucia. "I should never have got across but for you."

"But tell me about yourself, Dieppe," said the Count. "You 're really in a sad state, my dear fellow."

The Captain felt that the telling of his story was ticklish work. The Count sat down on the sofa; the two ladies stood behind it; their eyes were fixed on the Captain in warning glances.

"Well, I got a message from a fellow to-night to meet him on the hill outside the village—by the Cross there, you know. I fancied I knew what he wanted, so I went."

"That was after you parted from me, I suppose?" asked Emilia.

"Yes," said the Captain, boldly. "It was as I supposed. He was after my papers. There was another fellow with him. I—I don't know who—"

"Well, I daresay he did n't mention his name," suggested Lucia.

"No, no, he did n't," agreed the Captain, hastily. "I knew only Guillaume —and that name 's an alias of a certain M. Sévier, a police spy, who had his reasons for being interested in me. Well, my dear friend, Guillaume tried to bribe me. Then with the aid of—" Just in time the Captain checked himself—"of the other rascal he—er—attacked me—"

"All this was before you met me, I suppose?" inquired Lucia.

"Certainly, certainly," assented the Captain. "I had been pursuing the second fellow. I chased him across the river—"

"You caught him?" cried the Count.

"No. He escaped me and made off in the direction of Saselliano."

"And the first one—this Guillaume?"

"When I got back he was gone," said the Captain. "But I bear marks of a scratch which he gave me, you perceive."

He looked at the Count. The Count appeared excellently well satisfied with

the story. He looked at the ladies; they were smiling and nodding approval.

"Deuce take it," thought the Captain, "I seem to have hit on the right lies by chance!"

"All ends most happily," cried the Count. "Happily for you, my dear friend, and most happily for me. And here is Lucia with us again too! In truth it 's a most auspicious evening. I propose that we allow Lucia time to change her travelling-dress, and Dieppe a few moments to wash off the stains of battle, and then we 'll celebrate the joyous occasion with a little supper."

The Count's proposal met with no opposition—least of all from Dieppe, who suddenly remembered that he was famished.

The next morning, the garden of the Castle presented a pleasing sight. Workmen were busily engaged in pulling down the barricade, while the Count and Countess sat on a seat hard by. Sometimes they watched the operations; some-

times the Count read in a confidential and tender voice from a little sheaf of papers which he held in his hand. When he ceased reading, the Countess would murmur, "Beautiful!" and the Count shake his head in a poet's affectation of dissatisfaction with his verse. Then they would fall to watching the work of demolition again. At last the Count remarked:

"But where are Lucia and our friend Dieppe?"

"Walking together down there by the stream," answered the Countess. And, after a pause, she turned to him, and, in a very demure fashion, hazarded a suggestion. "Do you know, Andrea, I think Lucia and Captain Dieppe are inclined to take to one another very much?"

"It 's an uncommonly sudden attachment," laughed the Count.

"Yes," agreed his wife, biting her lip. "It 's certainly sudden. But consider in what an interesting way their ac-

quaintance began! Do you know anything about him?"

"I know he 's a gentleman, and a clever fellow," returned the Count. "And from time to time he makes some money, I believe."

"Lucia 's got some money," mused the Countess.

Down by the stream they walked, side by side, showing indeed (as the Countess remarked) every sign of taking to one another very much.

"You really think we shall hear no more of Paul de Roustache?" asked Lucia.

"I 'm sure of it; and I think M. Guillaume will let me alone too. Indeed there remains only one question."

"What 's that?" asked Lucia.

"How you are going to treat me," said the Captain. "Think what I have suffered already!"

"I could n't help that," she cried. "My word was absolutely pledged to Emilia. 'Whatever happens,' I said to her, 'I

promise I won't tell anybody that I 'm not the Countess.' If I had n't promised that, she could n't have gone to Rome at all, you know. She 'd have died sooner than let Andrea think she had left the Castle."

"You remember what you said to her. Do you remember what you said to me?"

"When?"

"When we talked in the hut in the hollow of the hill. You said you would be all that you could be to me."

"Did I say as much as that? And when I was Countess of Fieramondi! Oh!"

"Yes, and you let me do something—even when you were Countess of Fieramondi, too!"

"That was not playing the part well."

The Captain looked just a little doubtful, and Lucia laughed.

"Anyhow," said he, "you 're not Countess of Fieramondi now."

She looked up at him.

"You 're a very devout young lady," he continued, "who goes all the way to

Rome to consult the Bishop of Mesopotamia. Now, that"—the Captain took both her hands in his—"is exactly the sort of wife for me."

"Monsieur le Capitaine, I have always thought you a courageous man, and now I am sure of it. You have seen—and aided—all my deceit; and now you want to marry me!"

"A man can't know his wife too well," observed the Captain. "Come, let me go and communicate my wishes to Count Andrea."

"What? Why, you only met me for the first time last night!"

"Oh, but I can explain—"

"That you had previously fallen in love with the Countess of Fieramondi? For your own sake and ours too—"

"That 's very true," admitted the Captain. "I must wait a little, I suppose."

"You must wait to tell Andrea that you love me, but—"

"Precisely!" cried the Captain. "There is no reason in the world why I should wait to tell you."

And then and there he told her again in happiness the story which had seemed so tragic when it was wrung from him in the shepherd's hut.

"Undoubtedly, I am a very fortunate fellow," he cried, with his arm round Lucia's waist. "I come to this village by chance. By chance I am welcomed here instead of having to go to the inn. By chance I am the means of rescuing a charming lady from a sad embarrassment. I am enabled to send a rascal to the right-about. I succeed in preserving my papers. I inflict a most complete and ludicrous defeat on that crafty old fellow, Guillaume Sévier! And, by heaven! when I do what seems the unluckiest thing of all, when, against my will, I fall in love with my dear friend's wife, when my honour is opposed to my happiness, when I am reduced to the saddest plight —why, I say, by heaven, she turns out not to be his wife at all! Lucia, am I not born under a lucky star?"

"I think I should be very foolish not

to—to do my best to share your luck," said she.

"I am the happiest fellow in the world," he declared. "And that," he added, as though it were a rare and precious coincidence, "with my conscience quite at peace."

Perhaps it is rare, and perhaps the Captain's conscience had no right to be quite at peace. For certainly he had not told all the truth to his dear friend, the Count of Fieramondi. Yet since no more was heard of Paul de Roustache, and the Countess's journey remained an unbroken secret, these questions of casuistry need not be raised. After all, is it for a man to ruin the tranquillity of a home for the selfish pleasure of a conscience quite at peace?

But as to the consciences of those two very ingenious young ladies, the Countess of Fieramondi, and her cousin, Countess Lucia, the problem is more difficult. The Countess never confessed, and Lucia never betrayed, the secret. Yet they

were both devout! Indeed, the problem seems insoluble.

Stay, though! Perhaps the counsel and aid of the Bishop of Mesopotamia (*in partibus*) were invoked again. His lordship's position, that you must commit your sin before you can be absolved from the guilt of it, not only appears most logical in itself, but was, in the circumstances of the case, not discouraging.